

play

Metroid Prime

The first lady of gaming reborn

In-Depth Features

Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers
DoA Xtreme Beach Volleyball
MechAssault

First Reviews

Metroid Fusion
Rygar: The Legendary Adventure
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4
Resident Evil Zero

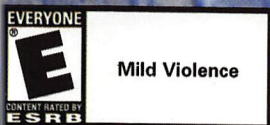
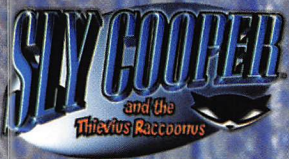


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PlayStation 2



LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.
PLAY IN OURS.

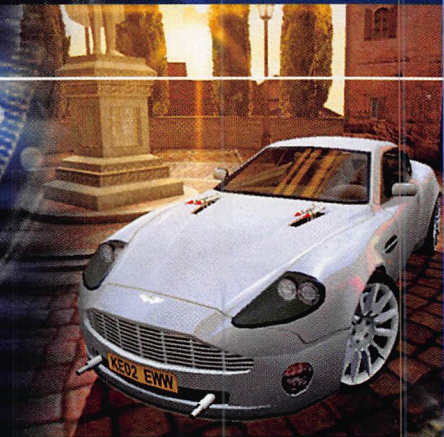


He's one cunning devious thievius raccoonus.



YOU HAVE 60 SECONDS TO SAVE THE WORLD. **GO.**

60:



You'll need a car, a very fast car, **tick**
a V12 Vanquish with tons of gadgets,



Violence
Suggestive Themes



PlayStation 2



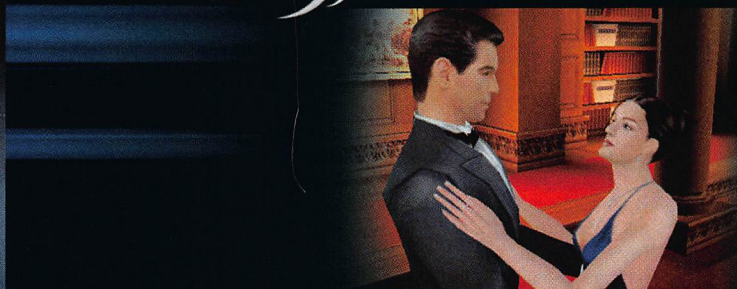
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enough gadgets, **tock** to help you blow up a space station,
or jump out of a plane and **tick** stop a secret military force,
before breaking into Mayhew's estate,



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or, engineering a rooftop escape from Phoenix International's Tokyo
office **tock** then exiting a burning gondola **tick** in the alps all in time
to rendezvous **tock** with secret agents Zoe and **tick** Dominique

but don't pat yourself on the back **tock** too much
because **tick** that was only one minute, and there
are still 1,400 left in the day **tock**.

**Sixty seconds of Bond's world.
It's more than most people
do their entire life.**

SEE
DIE ANOTHER DAY
IN THEATERS NOVEMBER 22



Challenge EverythingTM

welcome...

volume one / issue twelve

In our never-ending quest to reach the world with **play**, as we seek to add more and more dealers, we are often compared to the standard videogame magazine format in our endeavors. The buyers ask us why our content seems to be written for a post-teen or "mature" audience and why we don't have pages of codes and tips, because as far as they know, that is what fuels the videogame publication economy. Of course, we couldn't disagree more. Actually, when we set out to create **play** just one year ago, we toyed with the idea of making it a strictly 16-and-up affair, including colorful language (not to swear every four words to appear cool, but where applicable; it sucks to have to edit Ozzie Osbourne) maybe a touch of nudity (same rule applies) and perhaps push the envelope a bit in terms of our comics, media and the anime section. It's our assumption that the reason there are 50-million-plus people playing videogames in the U.S. while traditional magazines only sell in the hundreds of thousands is because the majority of people buying the software and consoles are adults (or thereabouts) and aren't necessarily in need of or interested in codes or reviews and previews that they can get online. *GTA III* isn't the biggest selling game of all time for nothing. Hence, we sought to make a magazine for "more mature and enthusiast readers." When push comes to shove, rather than go full tilt (early issues with naked cartoons got pulled), we've kind of landed in the middle. Stick a critter on the cover, though, and the retailers figure you're just like the rest anyway...so, what to do?

Now that we're established, the time has come to re-examine our position. Should we take the giant step forward and make the magazine we set out to originally? It would certainly distance

us from a pack we don't belong in anyway, and just maybe fill a huge gap in the marketplace—which leads me to you. Since you (hello, nice T-shirt) are obviously a **play** reader, what do you think? Should we take off the gloves or sock the mag full of codes and just blend in? You make the call! Email me and let's discuss.

In other news, is this a glorious Q4 or what? We've never been so inundated with new software in the decade we've been doing this. And while there are plenty of average (and below-) games, there seem to be more great ones than ever before. Question, though: who the heck is buying it all? There's at least 10 must-haves on every console, and they just keep coming. And what's with the GBA? Like 10 crappy games come out every week. I think it's high time Nintendo laid the smack down on some quality control, don't you? Our handy dandy Holiday Shoppers Guide of recent releases will help, especially where the GBA is concerned, so bust out the highlighter pen and give it to someone you love, preferably someone that has some cash to spend on you. We hope you enjoy our luscious BloodRayne insert, too. We kept it nice and clean—no big logo action mucking up the works—so stick it in a frame and blow agent BloodRayne a kiss everyday when you wake up; just remember who loves you, baby.

We'd like to say "Happy Holidays" to all of our readers and wish you a safe and happy new year. With all that's going on in the world, we need to appreciate life that much more, especially ones filled with the excitement and enchantment that videogames bring. Till next time then, enjoy the issue.

"Should we take off the gloves or sock the magazine full of codes?"



Dave Halverson,
Editor in Chief

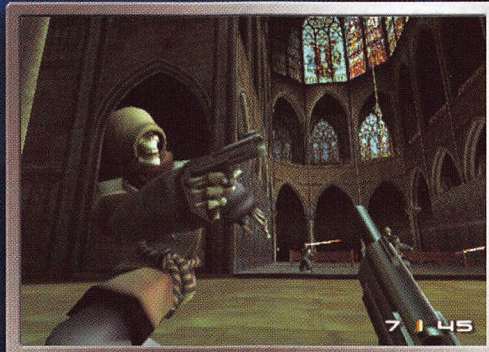
play magazine

THE MOST ACCLAIMED GAME OF THE YEAR

- 5/5 - Official PlayStation Magazine
- 9/10 Editor's Choice Award
- Official XBOX Magazine
- 4.75/5 - Nintendo Power
- 9/10 Game of the Month
- PSM
- 9.2/10 Editor's Choice Award
- IGN
- 10/10 - Gamers.com
- 98/100 Platinum Award
- Gamers.com
- 8.7/10 - GameSpot
- 4/5 - PLAY Magazine
- Silver Award - Editor's Choice
- Electronic Gaming Monthly

TIME SPLITTERS™ 2

OUT NOW!



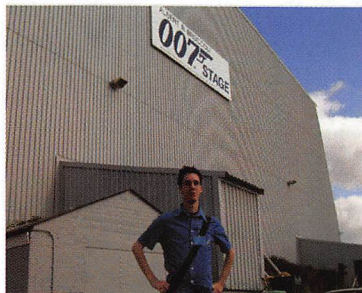
Violence

EIDOS
INTERACTIVE



PlayStation®2

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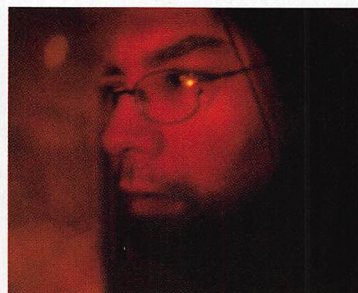
Jon M Gibson
Executive Editor

The search was long and hard; the flight: even more rigorous. Yet, fearless Jon evaded security to get on the 007 soundstage, all to snap a photo of a bikini-clad Halle Berry (see pgs 112-113).



Brady Fiechter
Editorial Director

Just like the mysterious briefcase in Mr. Tarantino's contemporary classic, *Pulp Fiction*, it's up to the reader to decide what exactly Brady is sipping from that bowl. Send ideas to bowl@play-magazine.com.



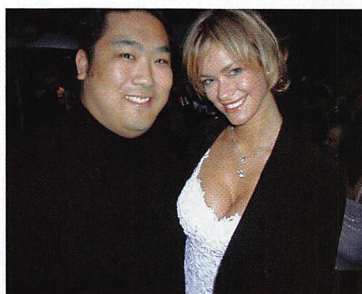
Michael Hobbs
Art Director

Oh smeg! *The Red Dwarf* DVDs are on the way. Smoke me a kipper, I'll be back in time for breakfast.



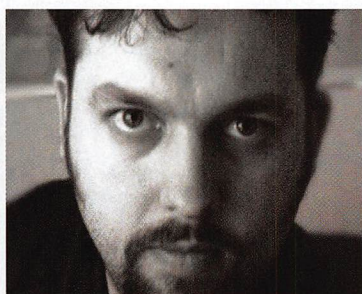
Nelson Lui
Assistant Art Director

Every time young Nelson looks in the window, that zany furball is always waving at him. But only in his wildest dreams has he actually pet it.



Tom Ham
Contributing Writer

Many loyal **play** readers have begun to question Mr. Ham's uncommon ability for attracting beautiful, *Playboy*-primed models in front of his camera lens. Quite simply, he pays them—a lot.



Ashley Wood
Contributing Artist

Ten years as a freelance illustrator has allotted Ash sufficient free time to develop a miracle anti-aging cream. So from his nimble 72-year-old hand he conjured this month's *Metroid* cover.

www.ashleywood.com

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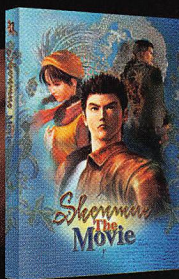
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Shenmue II is the sequel to Shenmue, the first in a new action-adventure series from SEGA. In Shenmue II, you'll follow the story of Ryo Hoshinaka, a young man who's been searching for his father, who disappeared when he was a child. In this sequel, Ryo will continue his quest to uncover the truth about his father's disappearance and the secrets of the mysterious island of Yumenoshima.

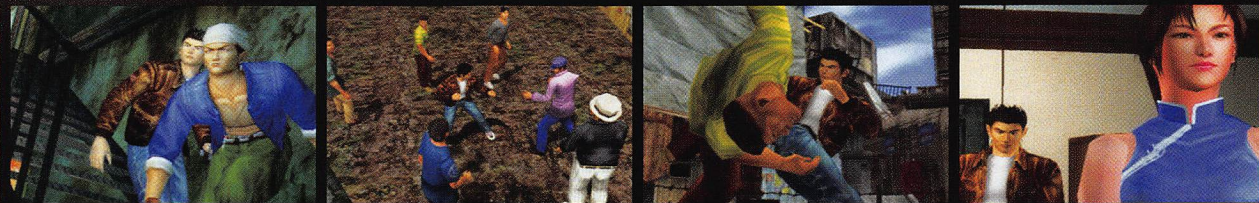


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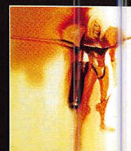
024

metroid prime

Nintendo launches an all-out assault this holiday season with this next-gen update of the classic *Metroid* formula leading the pack.

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original cover illustration
by ashley wood



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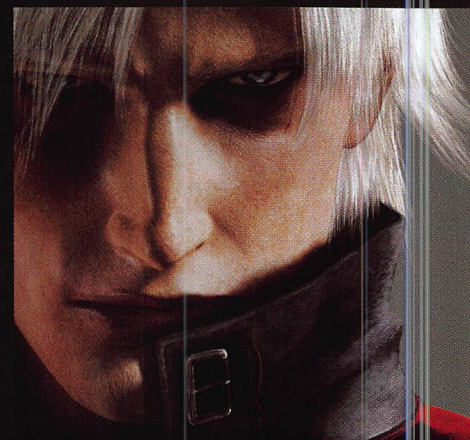
more...

096 tokyo game show



Just one of many hundreds of booth babes awaiting your drool in our TGS 2002 pictorial.

040 devil may cry 2



Who needs nine lives when you can control time?



Rewind time to throw the world in reverse and uncover secret areas.



Hit fast-forward to tackle challenges that require you to be quick on your paws.



Slam on pause to take free shots at frozen enemies or grab crystals without any hassle.



Record yourself during wild adventures, then replay for twice the Blinx™ action.



Go slo-mo to make everyone seem like they're stuck in mud as you and "The Time Sweeper™" do damage.



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spider-man

Director **Sam Raimi** and producer **Laura Ziskin** offer their afterthoughts to what has been the most successful superhero film ever.

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122 film 8 crazy nights



Adam Sandler's trademark comedy—and songs—take shape in this not-so-clean animated flick.

128 film die another day





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Whether you have questions, criticisms—or if you just want to vent—E-mail us

letters@play-magazine.com

NOW WE'RE PISSED!

My name is Rob and I have been a fan of your work for a while. This is the third mag that I have followed you guys to. I loved *GameFan* D.D. (during Dave) and A.D. (after Dave) and I enjoyed *Gamers' Republic*. There is no doubt that **play** is the best magazine on the market today. That is a compliment, but also isn't saying much when compared to the competition. I enjoy that you guys have the hardcore spirit. You are the only mag that truly has it. I think the page layout is the best and nobody has better screen captures. I also enjoy that you have game store advertisements in the back (like McVans).

I do have some problems with your mag, though. I know you guys like to cover the games you enjoy most, but I would like to see more obscure games covered. Every mag is covering *Blinx* (except *PSM* and *Nintendo Power*), and every mag is covering *Shinobi*. It's great that they are in there, but I am almost positive that if somebody is reading **play** that they already have all the knowledge they could ever want about those games. Also—and this is my biggest problem with **play**—is that you say you are underground, but you cover all of the big movies and some recognizable recording artists. I enjoy what you have—interviews and all—but I wish you would match your hardcore gaming spirit with a hardcore film and music spirit. There are so many films out there that are fantastic but get no coverage. Instead of covering the latest *Blade* film, cover something like *Visitor Q* or *The Toxic Avenger 4!* *Aime* alone doesn't qualify as underground anymore; it is, unfortunately, mainstream now.

Now before you get pissed, please remember that I

"With the flood of software out there these days, I'm glad I still have an opinion I can trust to lead me through the crap and straight to the gaming nirvana!"

have been with you since '94 (meaning I go where you do). I am even getting a subscription to **play**. I haven't gotten a subscription since I bought the premiere issue of *GameGo* for \$25—you know what I am talking about! If you have time, write me back and tell me what you think about my comments and criticisms. All in all, **play** is great and it single-handedly renewed my faith in the print mag format! Keep up the good work and thanks for reading.

Rob "The 5th Turtle" Faraldi
via e-mail

Pissed? Nah, never. Scrutiny is good. We hear you Houston, but there is a problem; the other mags won't get *Blinx* or *Shinobi*, just like they didn't get *ToeJam & Earl III* and *Herdy Gerdy*, or *Jet Set Radio Future* and *Gun Valkyrie*, and a host of other great games. The only way for *real* gamers to get the info they need and deserve is through play. So what we try to provide is less *T. Hawk* and codes—because that audience is built in and they're getting *HEAVY* coverage from the mainstream pubs—and more, say, *Rygar* or *Malice*. On the media side, though, we hear you and agree. You can expect more edgy fare in upcoming issues. We

walk a fine line here at play; on the one hand, we need to appease a much more demanding reader, while on the other, provide enough diversity to recruit newbies to the ways of play. Currently, we're considering going strictly 16-and-up so we can really connect with our readers where they—and we—live. It's a little tricky on the retail side, but we're working on that. Whenever you break convention in publishing, it gets a little sticky.

NUTHIN' BUT NET?

A friend of mine recently showed me a copy of **play** and I was thoroughly delighted when I saw Dave Halverson's name along with other familiar faces in the masthead. I was a huge fan of *GameFan* and *Gamers' Republic*, and have nearly every issue of both magazines. I was so dejected when *Republic* disappeared off store shelves; I hadn't picked up any gaming magazines since, relying on the internet for all my gaming news and reviews. I guess I was a little out of the loop, as I had no idea you had another magazine out there. But with everything you can get off the net these days, I would still buy any publication with your names on it. *GF* and *GR* were the best damn gaming magazines ever published. The quality of pictures, layouts, and information you continually put out was second to none. If there was any magazine I trusted for all my gaming purchases, it was your's. I am also a huge fan of action/platform titles, and I have enjoyed many great titles over the years thanks to your recommendations that I probably would have otherwise overlooked. As a matter of fact, I just finished *Sly Cooper* a few days

ago. What a fantastic game! I just wanted to say thanks for all your hard work and reviews over the years. As a fellow gamer who's been playing games since my parents brought home our first Atari 2600 all those years ago—hell, we even had *Pong*!—it's been a fun ride over the years. With the flood of software out there these days, I'm glad I still have an opinion I can trust to lead me through the crap and straight to gaming nirvana! Thanks for all the great years, and here's to many more!

Jeff
via e-mail

Well, what can I (we) say. Thank you. We try every month to print mean and/or edgy letters, but they're mostly like yours, which I suppose is why we're still here doing what we do. It's amazing given that the vast majority of active gamers are adults—that we're still alone in our crusade—but here we are. What's even better is that play, unlike *GF* and *GR*, is just us, so we're completely free for the first time in a decade to just do whatever we want. I gotta' tell you, it's f—kin' great, so we're glad you like it. Speaking of action/platformers: Has this been the year or what? While



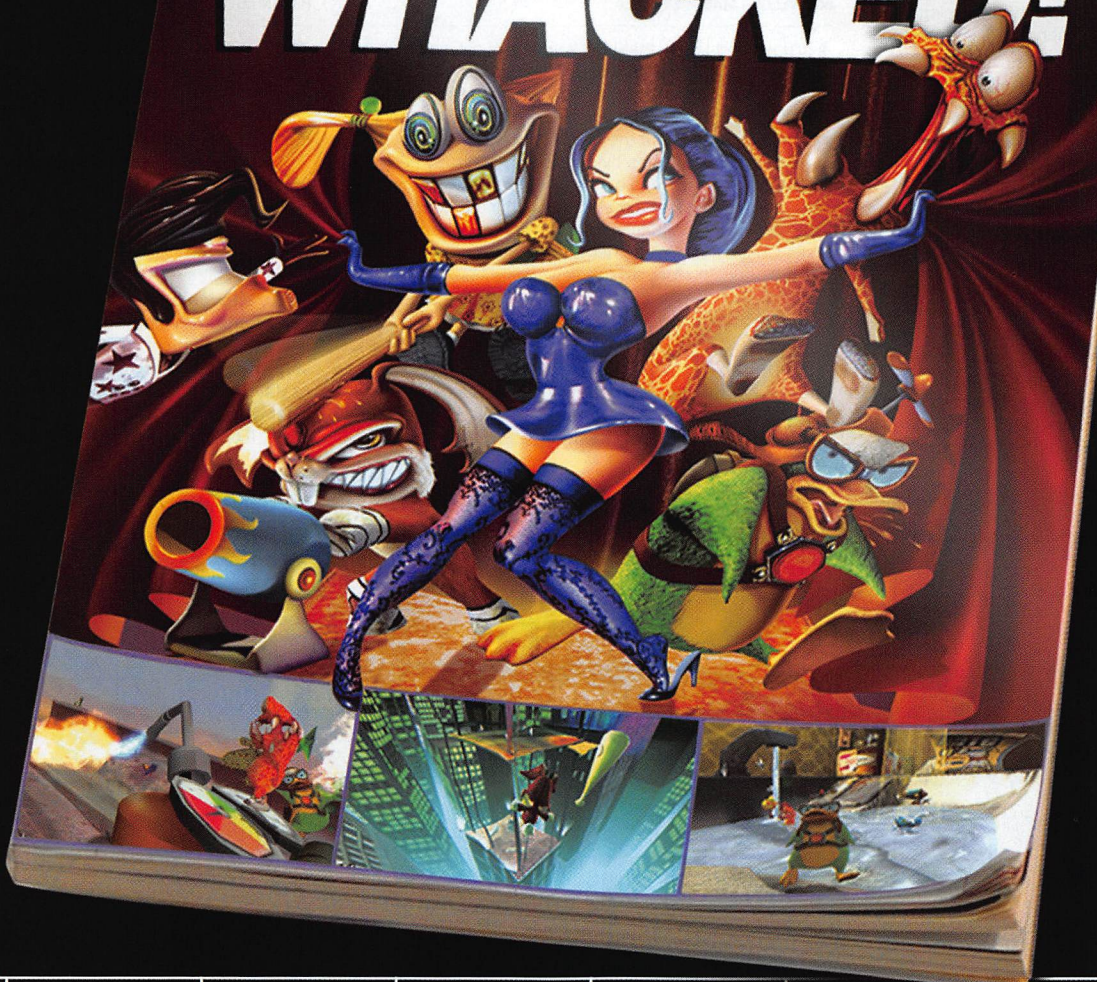
"There is no doubt that play is the best magazine on the market today. That is a compliment, but also isn't saying much when compared to the competition."

— Rob "The 5th Turtle" Faraldi

TV
WEAKLY

FINALLY, A GAME SHOW
THAT SEPARATES
THE BAD-ASSES FROM
THE BED-WETTERS.

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CHNL	8:00	9:00	10:00	11:00	12:00	1:00	2:00
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VIOLENCE

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VIOLENCE (Now online)

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Mature Sexual Themes
Violence
Strong Language



WHACKED!
GAME SHOW GONE WRONG

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Vexx and Malice are now both Q1 2003 titles, *Blinx*, *Sly Cooper*, *Ratchet & Clank*, *Rygar*, *Mario Sunshine*, *StarFox Adventures*, *Shinobi*, *Metroid Prime* are out or coming out soon—is this a grand year or what! As for the rest of the glut, God help the *Antz Racing* games of the world. Thanks again, and have a great holiday, to all of our readers!

MEGA OOPS!

I noticed a few peculiarities in my November issue and since part of the reason I buy *play* is for the design, I was curious as to how such blatant abnormalities could slip thru. The MadKatz light-gun in *Gear* is messed up; the Y's art in anime is missing and duplicated; and the *Blinx* layout looks like shots are missing—either that or it's a really weird layout. There are a couple of other things, too. Great issue on the hole, though. Thank God someone respected *ToeJam and Earl III*. I liked the cover story, too—is it me or does *Ratchet & Clank* seem to be getting less hype than *Jak and Daxter* did?

Initial D
via e-mail

We received a few letters like yours. We're glad people noticed, but we were actually really sick about the glitches. In a rare occurrence, our printer had updated software and, as a result of some shoddy beta-testing, certain random pages glitched after we proofed them and sent them on to the plant. As finicky as we are about our graphics, it was a sad day at play when we received the issue. We had the pressman drawn and quartered, though, so now we feel better—a little. On *TJ&E III*—yah, it's shocking how anything unique these days is scrutinized by a lot of the "mainstream"

press. The sad truth is most of our readers are more qualified than they are—a sad fact. *Ty Tiger* got raped, too, mostly by people who played it all of five minutes. On *Ratchet & Clank*, that's why we did the cover; the game is absolutely epic in every way. Let's hope it fares better than the misunderstood *Jak & Daxter*, last year's most underrated game.

"F—k this! How could the people at Rare actually give into those PC gangsters at Microsoft. I know it's \$430 mil, but come on! All I hope is that *Kameo* fails and *Perfect Dark* stays with Nintendo as one of their mascots."

MARVELOUS MAG

I just wanted to say that I think you guys are doing a freaking great job with your magazine. It's great to finally see a gaming magazine that's made for big kids like me. You guys have a true respect for, not only games themselves, but the people who play them and make them. Every game I've picked up that *play* has recommended has been outstanding! Not to mention the nice, clean layout that a majority of gaming magazines lack. Oh yeah, and thanks to whoever recommended Nikka Costa. I picked up her CD just the other day and adore it! Looking forward to the web site.

Carrie
via e-mail

Thanks, Carrie. Everyone at the magazine loves to hear comments like your's. Every month, we eat, sleep, and dream about the publication, so a compli-

RIOTING OVER RARE

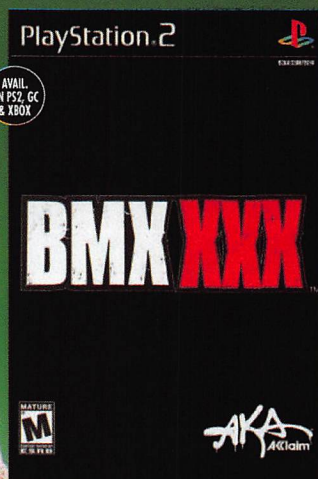
F—k this! How could the people at Rare actually give into those PC gangsters at Microsoft. I know it's \$430 mil, but come on! All I hope is that this *Kameo* fails, *Perfect Dark* stays with Nintendo as one of their mascots, and that Mafiasoft can 'em; then Rare can return to Nintendo. Also, why has music coverage been light around the last couple of issues?

Regal Sin
via e-mail

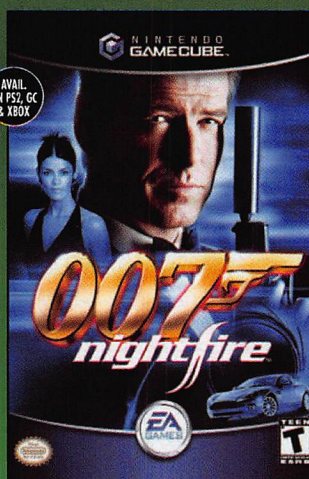
Oddly enough, that's probably one of the first negative comments we've heard about Microsoft getting in bed with Rare. While it's yet to be seen if the relationship will prove to be a thing of legend, the prospects of Rare working on the Xbox is extremely promising. Give 'em some time. And as far as music coverage goes, flip to the back of this issue. You'll be pleased.

NO MORE REINDEER GAMES!

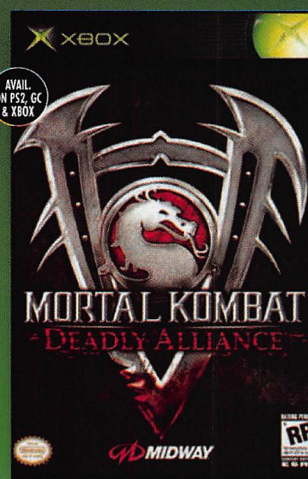
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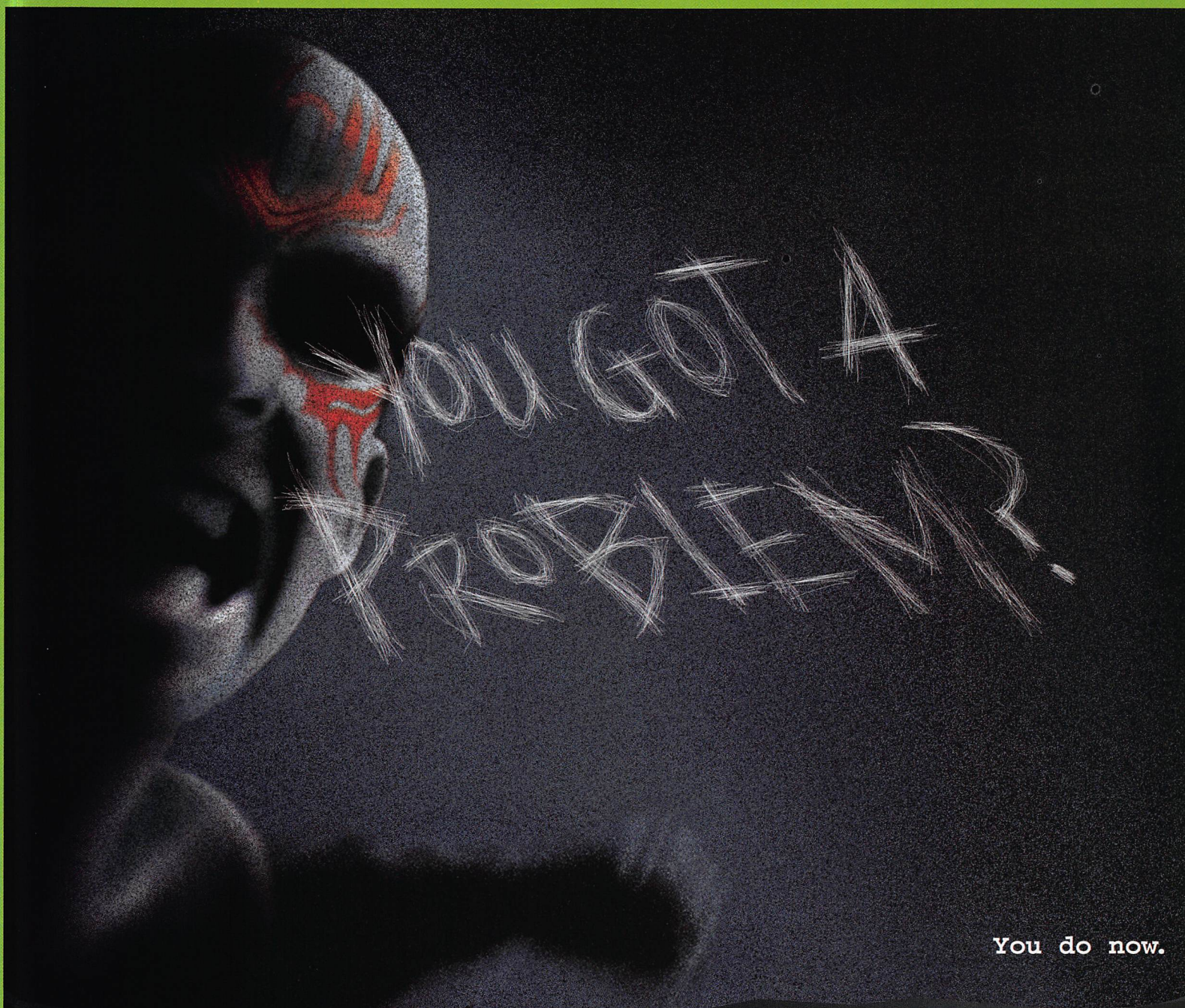
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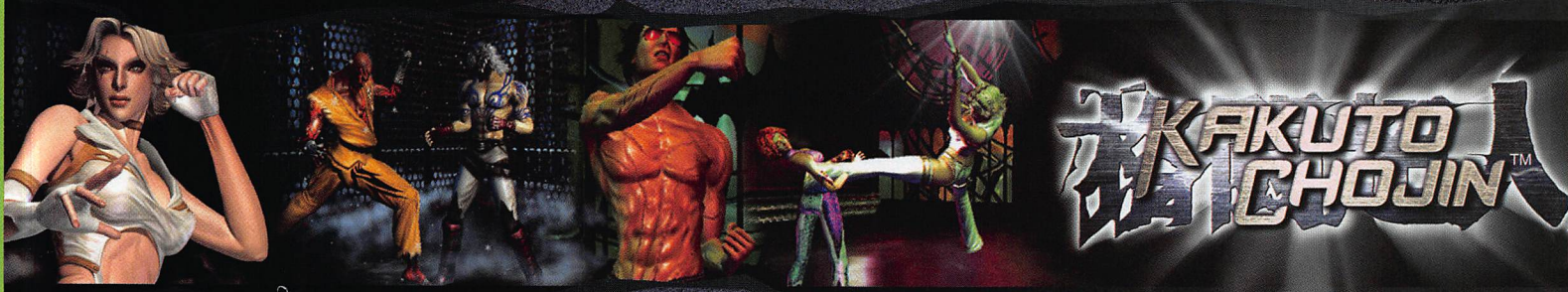
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OUT OF THE OOZE

The original shell-shocking franchise returns in 2003 with new games, a TV show, and action figures.

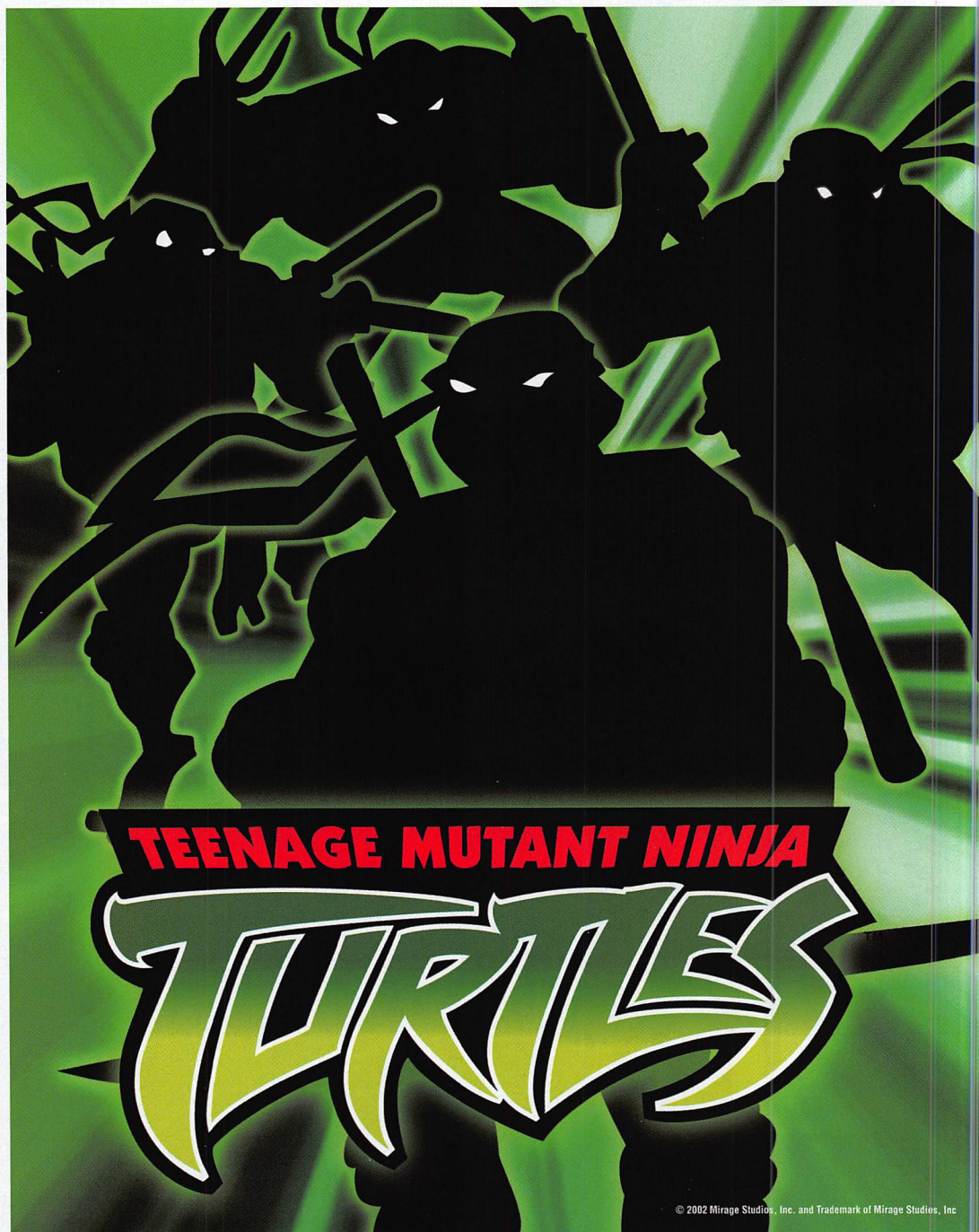
The Supreme Green Fightin' Machine is making a triumphant return, but these aren't the same reptiles you remember.

Beginning in early 2003, 4Kids Entertainment will launch the revival of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* animated series, completely overhauled with the original comic book aesthetics by Mirage Studios. Gone are the painfully family-friendly action heroes, replaced with a design much closer to the specs sketched out by co-creators Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird in the mid-'80s. The show, featuring the edgy, aggressive crime-fighters, will premiere in February '03 on Fox Box's Saturday morning lineup and is initially scheduled for a 26-episode run.

Also upholding the strength of the billion-dollar franchise is a new batch of action figures from Playmates (the classic playthings sold more than 245 million units worldwide). Debuting on store shelves in conjunction with the cartoon, the toys bare a striking resemblance to the early-'90s figures, each accompanied by authentic ninja weapons. Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael and Michelangelo—along with Splinter, Shredder and the rest of the memorable catalog of characters—will all get the plastic treatment. But for old-school fans desperate for an early fix, Diamond Comic Distributors is offering an exclusive 12-inch, cold-cast resin sculpture of Leonardo (the first of four) in the December *Previews* (check with your local comic shop).

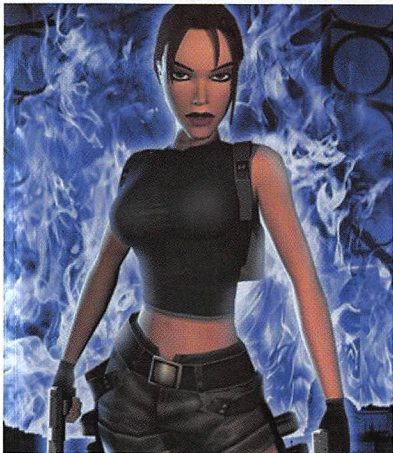
Finally, Konami recently announced that they, too, will contribute to the renewal of the *Turtles* franchise by releasing an undisclosed number of games, beginning with a next-gen title in fall '03. While a possible port of the classic 8-bit games on GBA is also a possibility, the publisher (who is also developing the action romps in-house) hasn't officially announced anything.

One thing's for sure, though: "The heroes in a half shell" are back in action! **play**



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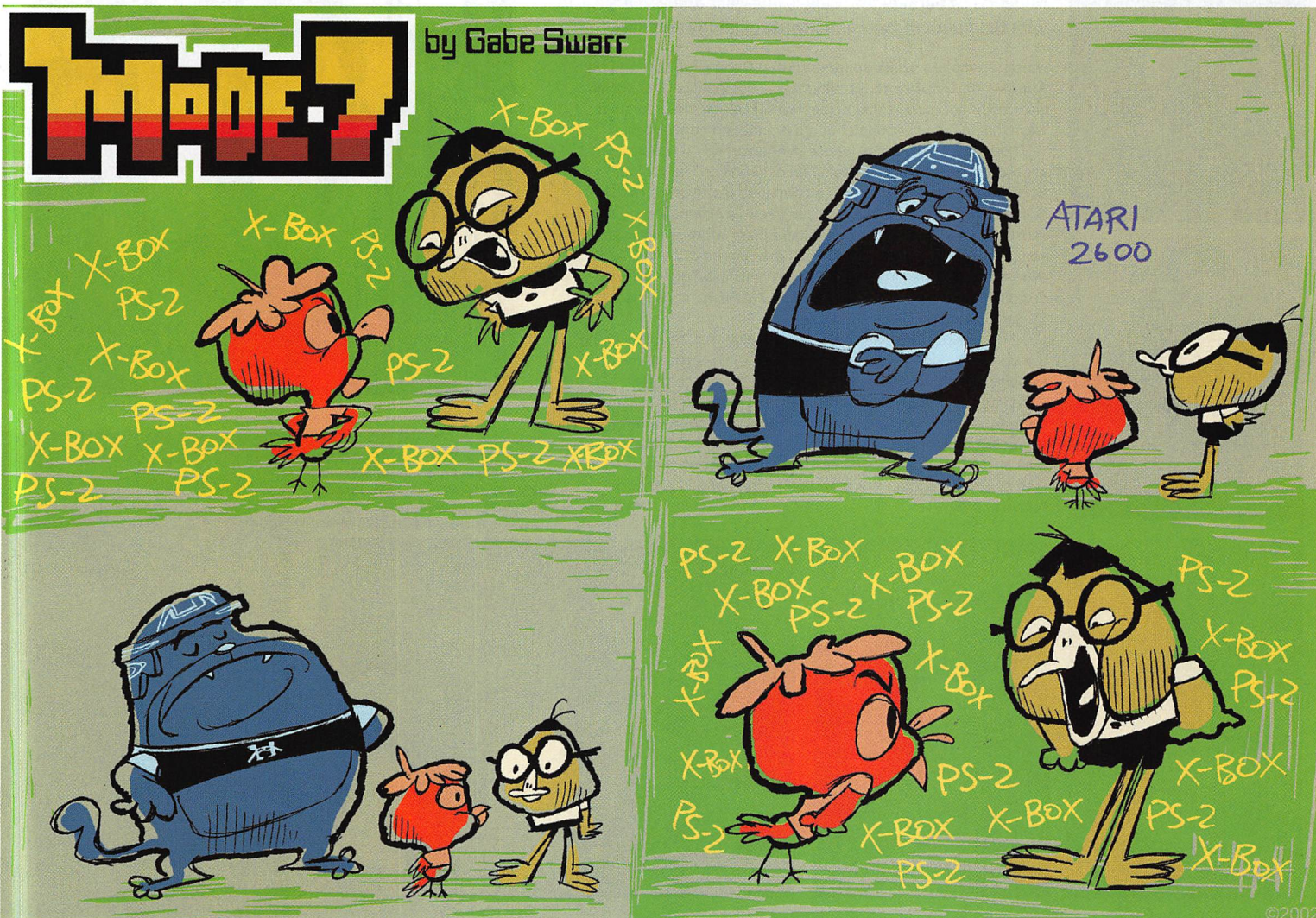
TARDY MS. CROFT



While fans have been eagerly awaiting Lara Croft's next-gen debut, the anticipation will have to stem a bit further into 2003. Granting developer Core a few extra months to button up *The Angel of Darkness*, Eidos has pushed back the release of the latest installment in the Tomb Raider franchise until mid-February. But this delay may actually work to Lara's advantage, considering Paramount is scheduled to release their big screen sequel, *The Cradle of Life*, next June—allowing the game to cash in on some big Hollywood marketing dollars.

DRAGON BALL Z AUCTION

On December 1, 2002, IF Labs will auction off an exclusive, original prototype of Super Saiyan 3 Goku straight from their laboratory. In the spirit of the holiday season, the proceeds of the auction will go to various children's charities. The decision to provide the prototype was initiated by fan requests for exclusive, original product from IF Labs. Super Saiyan 3 Goku is one of the most powerful characters in the Dragon Ball Z series and is one of IF Labs' most sought-after figures. The auction will be hosted by eBay. For updates, visit www.dragonballz.com or www.if-labs.com.



NAKED BOX

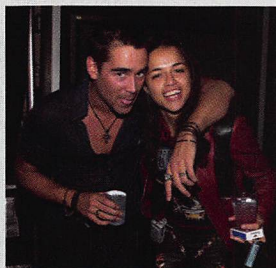
Microsoft undresses the latest in truly 'interactive' gaming, N.U.D.E.

The name of the game may be deceiving, since there's virtually no inkling of whether or not there actually *is* nudity in the game, but *N.U.D.E.* (*Natural Ultimate Digital Experiment*) definitely does push the envelope in other respects. Like Sega's ambitious—yet financially disappointing—*Seaman*, players are charged with nurturing the development of an ample-breasted, pigtailed robot by utilizing the Xbox Communicator. While the attractive bot is full-grown from the onset of the simulator, she lacks virtually all other aspects of intellect.

The goal: educate her through voice commands, helping her blossom into a foul-mouthed, sexually overdriven synthetic being (that being only one of the many possibilities, pending that's actually *your* prerogative). The outcomes are, in theory, infinite; it's ultimately at the player's fingertips to define and develop their robot's personality. Hopefully, though, when the game arrives stateside, the title—along with all the other Japanese-centric gameplay gears—will remain intact. **play**



NOT SQUARE CLUB, CUBE CLUB

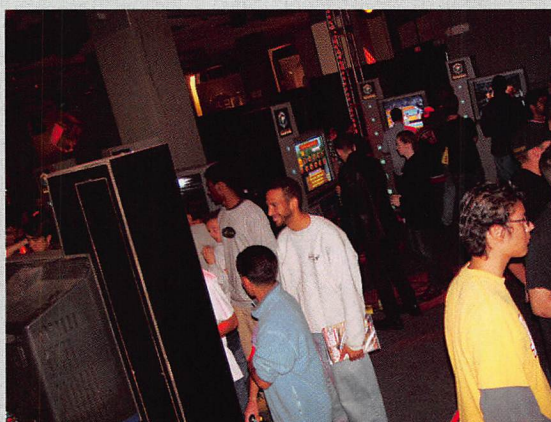
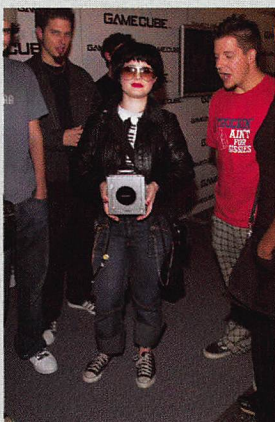
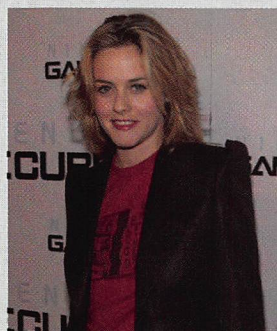


Nintendo celebrates the 'Cube's one-year anniversary with the return of their nationwide gaming sanctuary.

Nintendo kicked off its second annual Cube Club tour in Los Angeles on October 17, proving to the competition that social intercourse for gamers can be achieved in much more personal ways than a network adapter and a broadband connection.

The clubs, taking up residence in abandoned complexes in downtown districts (LA's being an old bank on Hollywood Boulevard), give Nintendo fans a chance to demo some of this holiday's high profile 'Cube releases (*Metroid Prime*, *Mario Party 4*, *James Bond 007: Nightfire*, *1080°*, and many more), some of next year's most anticipated adventures (*The Legend of Zelda*), and even a few handheld games at the cozy GBA stations (*Metroid Fusion*, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*). In all, there are 28 games to keep your fingers busy.

And while the long lines outside each club may be intimidating, the party is by no means a celebrity affair (unless you were trapped in the ridiculously long line at the LA launch party, watching quasi-stars like Fred Savage zip past you on the "red carpet"). Simply log onto www.nintendogamecube.com/cubeclub to print out a ticket for two. That ease of entrance—plus all the free Snapple you can drink, considering they are the lead sponsor—add up to a sumptuous afternoon in electronic heaven. **play**



(Counter-clockwise from top) Colin Farrell and Michelle Rodriguez at the Cube Club launch party in LA; Alicia Silverstone; Christina Aguilera; Kelly Osbourne; and gamers enjoying free Snapple and early GC and GBA demos.

CUBE CLUB SCHEDULE

(remaining dates)

NOV 14 - 23

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NOV 29 - DEC 7

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DEC 12 - 21

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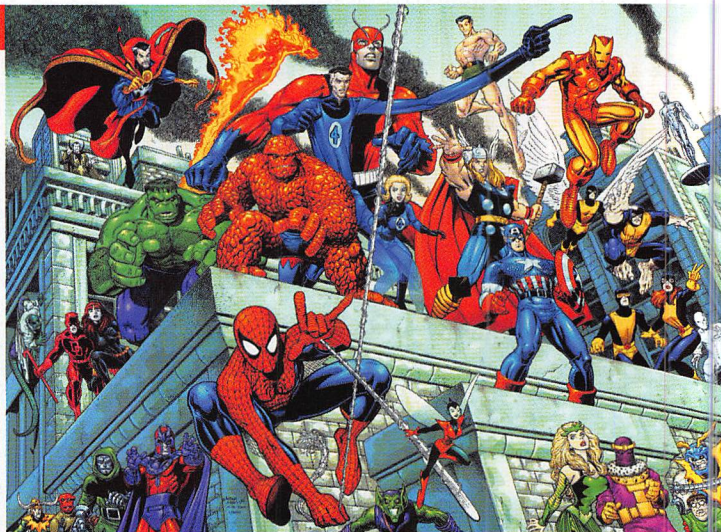
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MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER MARVEL

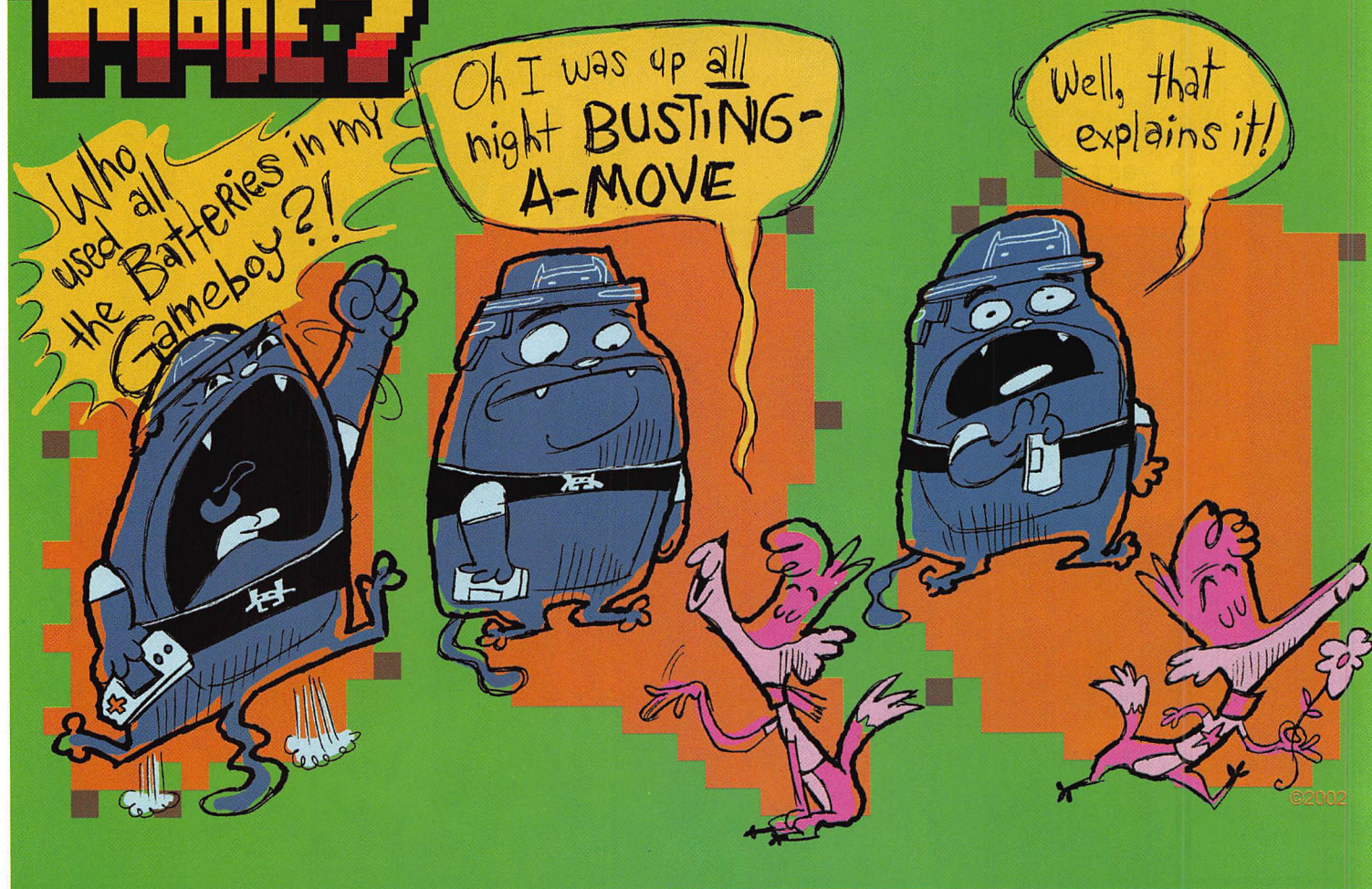
Vivendi Universal brings the Marvel Comics universe to the online gameplay arena.

With *Everquest* briskly growing its user base every month—and no sign of slow down—and LucaArts getting into the mix with *Star Wars Galaxies*, it's obvious that the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) market is just beginning to reach its full potential. Enter Vivendi Universal, who after witnessing the quick expansion of the genre, opted to license over 4,700 characters from the Marvel Comics' vault to apply to an online landscape. Encompassing superheroes and their respective villains from the publisher's entire comic book timeline—dating back to the inception of *The X-Men* to modern creations like Mr. Sensitive of *X-Statix* fame—the base game in the franchise is targeted for a mid-2005 release. But with a ten-year licensing deal already set in stone, expect a plethora of expansion packs to follow. **play**



MODE 7

by Gabe Swarr



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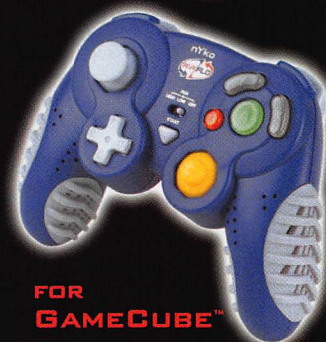


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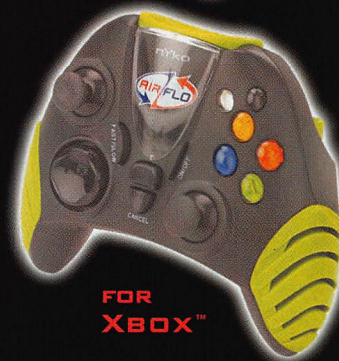
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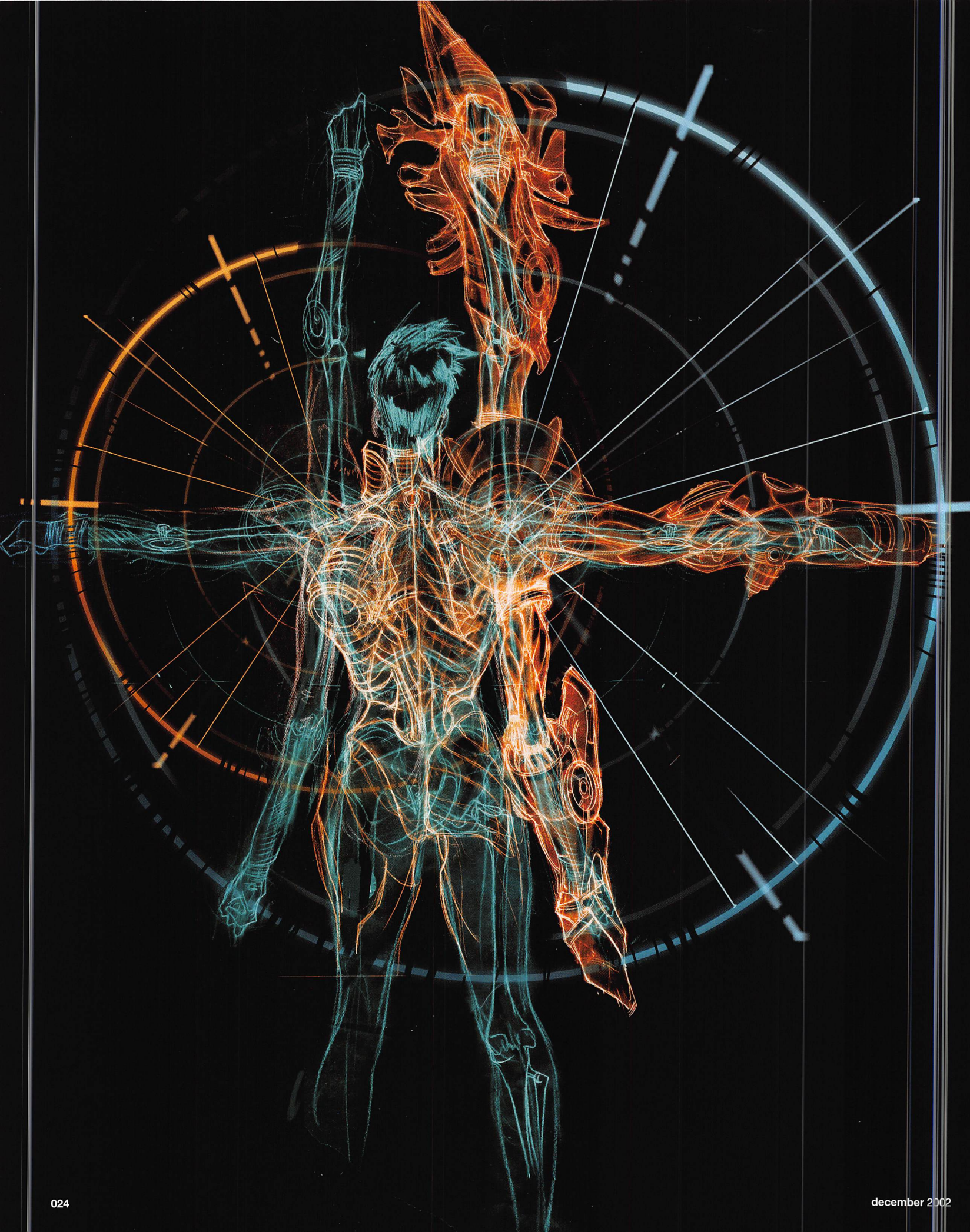
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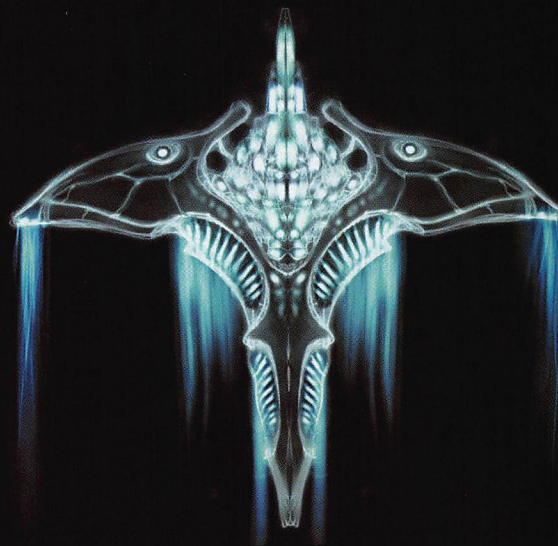


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Samus' grand return

METROIDPRIME

words brady fiechter

And so came the final battle with Mother Brain, her fleshy core exposed through the glass casing that cracked from an onslaught of missiles. In victory, an intriguingly enigmatic Samus, the hero with a true identity ominously shrouded inside a space suit, removed her helmet, shockingly revealing her feminine face. Samus was a woman?

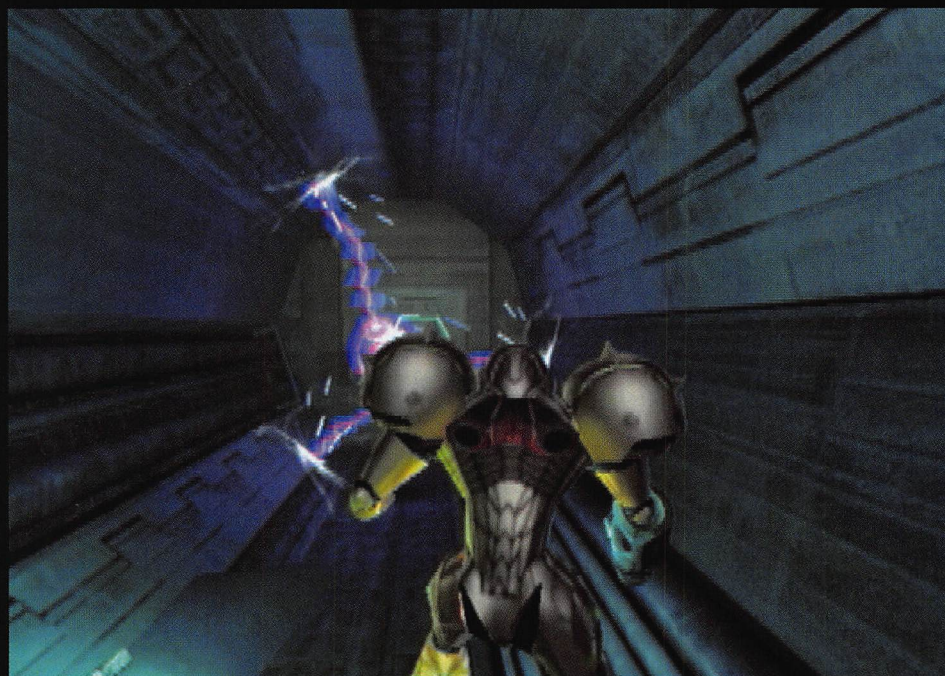
Indeed she was, the original femme fatale of the videogame world, a powerful super-vixen packed with fusion bombs, wave beams, grappling guns and gravity-defying super boots. Her inhospitable surroundings were an infinitely distant alien planet filled with strange, aggressive creatures crawling on walls and ceilings, swimming through pits of lava and sand. It was one of the most distinctly atmospheric places ever imagined for a videogame, and we were the masters of this quietly unsettling universe, tangled in psychological depths rarely reached to this day.

It's been a decade without the continuation of what more than a few of us consider one of the greatest series in gaming. In its ridiculously long absence, nothing has played, looked, felt or sounded like *Metroid*. There was a spirit to the game that was ineffable in its pull and hypnotically engaging in its visionary images and world design. To awaken this energy yet again after so much change might seem a futile attempt, but gratefully someone has finally tried. Here it is: *Metroid Prime*, a sequel that was never supposed to be, made no sense in theory, came out of a fledgling American studio, went the way of total 3D, and carried heavy baggage from a number of sources. And ultimately succeeded: *Metroid Prime* carries the Metroid

flag with unwavering conviction, succeeding as a proper sequel and, above all, an incredible achievement in the art of compelling gamemaking.

Samus continues to be the savior of the universe, living the Metroid saga during the time before the original game's story began. Her presence is subtly made known through facial reflections in her helmet when the light plays just right; details in this game are amazing: rain drops, falling in random patterns, pelt her visor, and atmospheric changes leave condensation and crystals of ice. When she jumps, the slightest stumble is felt on the landing. The discharge of her gun leaves streaks and smoke, lurching and pitching just right.

The origin of the Metroid entities and the development of Mother Brain is the centerpiece of *Metroid Prime*, cleverly detailed through the scanning system. Hooked into Samus' visor is a device that which locks on to multiple objects in a room, both organic and inorganic, downloading information and providing access to equipment and locking mechanisms. Scanning an enemy, either dead or alive, gives valuable clues to locate soft spots and better understand the surroundings. By learning the habits of a creature and studying the corpses of the dead,—"the spinal



If these shots don't excite you, nothing will.

column has been crushed"—*Metroid's* world expands its level of immersion, bringing dimension and presence to the visual fantasy.

While this adventure is presented in the first-person, it is not like any first-person shooter out there. The pacing is more staid, relying heavily on moody tension and apprehension as much as adrenaline-charged shootouts. The skillfully structured corridors, channels, and hallways hold tremendous amounts of enemy resistance, but there is never any warning as to the severity or numbers of the encounter; you can leave and enter an empty room with your heart pumping just as hard as if a swarm of creatures attacked with bloody impunity.

Where most first-person games rely on the console-precise dual-analog control schemes and swiftness of play, *Metroid Prime* slows the movement way down and asks that we familiarize ourselves with an intuitive lock-on system. Samus is commanded with the left analog stick and does most of the shooting while strafing around a fixed target. It feels like playing, say, *Zelda* with a long-range weapon from a third-person perspective. Jumping also constantly comes into play, requiring precision platforming and an uncommon awareness of the environmental hazards for an FPS.

What makes *Metroid Prime* so faithful is that it is indeed an adventure in the vein of the series—*Metroid* in the first-person. All the elements are in place, handled with surprising care and understanding. The more we play, the more we sink into the *Metroid* ether.

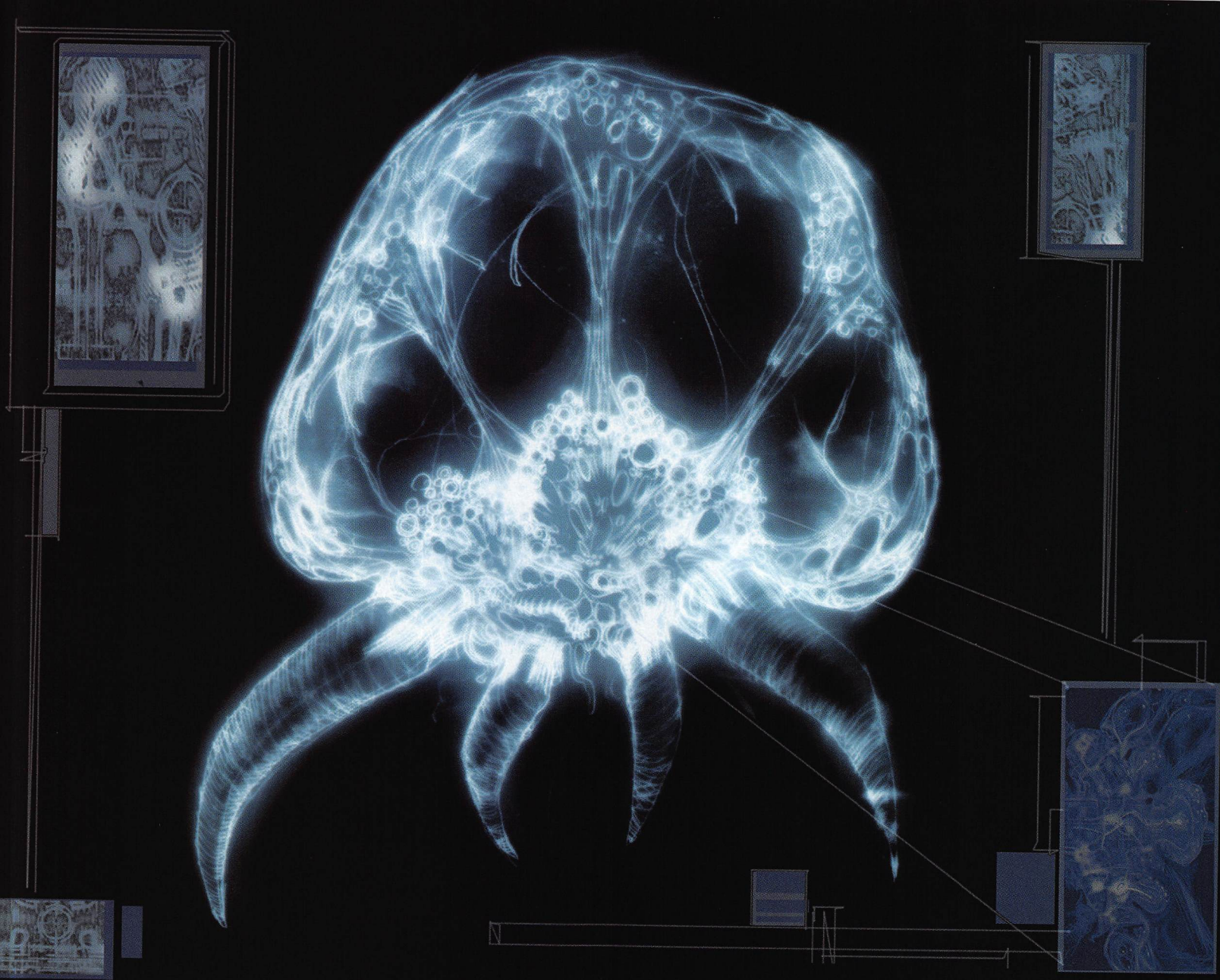
As the gorgeous opening cinema leads into the game's initial stage in a space station, Samus exits her ship in glorious fashion, the classic music taking us back to nostalgic wonder. The view is captivating, framed in floating asteroids, a brilliant space backdrop and an incredible lattice work of beams and pipes and the many futuristic protrusions and objects that look cooler than they are functional. Often times throughout the game, you find yourself pausing to drink in the awe of it all, enjoying the existence in such a foreign place as much as the engagement of its conflict.

Once inside, you meet the first of an overwhelming number of angry creatures, superbly constructed and intelligently brought to life. You will die in this game, but not cheaply; it forces commitment to deliberate, careful gameplay and thoughtful progression, with your gaming senses continually engaged from all angles. Enemies demonstrate complex patterns and provide an amazing array of attack maneuvering, culminating in several extraordinary boss encounters, from mutated plants and dragonlike birds to parasitic monsters and flaming mechanical defense drones.

The game is full of original ideas and scenarios, and there is never a moment when some chain of event doesn't lead to yet another chain, dramatically played out in style and complex form. We don't just face an enemy, fire, find a clue, and move on. The game happens to us. We watch things go down, see enemies set up, find a situation escalate through our actions.

"...you might just proclaim that you've played one of the best games of the year."







always feeling attached to the action in a very deep way.

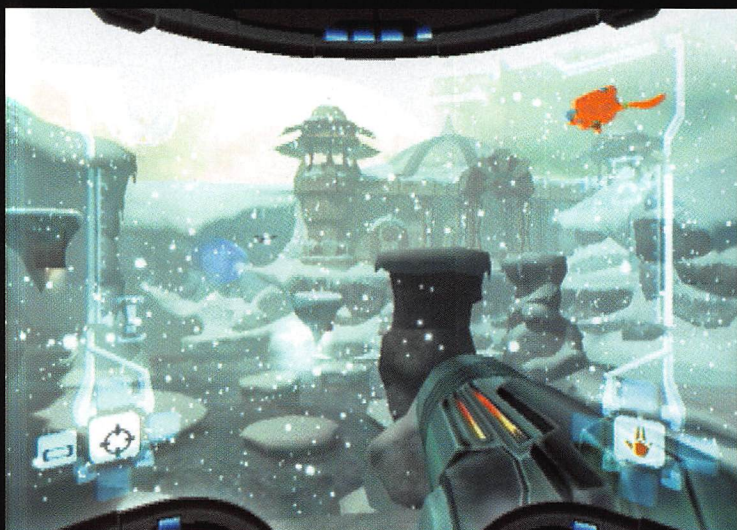
The first area is a good point of acclimation. The developers tease you by providing Samus a full range of motion and offensive power, but rip it all away as she receives incapacitating damage that destroys her suit and removes its staple capabilities such as missile shots, charge beam and morph ball. Totally helpless, it's down to the surface of a richly organic planet that holds countless secrets.

One of the elements that made *Metroid* so involving was its labyrinthine level structure, which interlocked and held multiple points of entry that branched and winded back on itself. It was brilliantly laid out, and *Metroid Prime* has captured this same soaring sense of adventure. It is enormous and engulfing, so full of mood and mystery, with levels that tighten down on your senses and sometimes impart an eerie claustrophobia. There is a huge amount of backtracking, but you welcome this style of play because of how expertly it is delivered. You may see a tiny hole in a wall hours back from where you started, and you just know you'll somehow be dumped out in that area again. Such a spot might open up an entirely new world of exploration with different obstacles and even more exciting items to find. The game is about finding weapons and power-ups to get more weapons and power-ups. Ninety-five percent of an area may be accessible, but that toxic swamp in the far corner might need a special suit to survive in. So where's the suit? When you find it, and get new weapons like the ice beam or bomb, the satisfaction and drive to find more is intoxicating—just as it was in *Super Metroid* and *Metroid*.

If there is a big flaw in *Metroid Prime*, I have yet to find it. The only area of contention could be in the unusual focus on platforming and other touchy methods of getting around the world in the first person. In this perspective, precision jumping has always been a problem, but to the game's credit, it's handled remarkably well. When you do finally receive the double jump—a technique trademarked by *Super Metroid*—it feels as good and faithful as it possibly could.

When *Metroid Prime* was announced as a first-person shooter, the discriminating scoffs of avid *Metroid* fans came fast and hard. How unfortunate; don't for a second disregard this game as an unfaithful interpretation of the *Metroid* universe. There are many times when the *Metroid* flame burns bright again, yet there are times when the game sparks its own virtuosity. When the remixed music takes over, when the first energy tank boosts your tolerance, when the missile bay gets another pack of ten, you can't deny that nostalgic bristle, and the game is certainly better because of it. But judge this magnificent game on its own merits, allow it to burrow into your sense of wonder like the best games do, and you might just proclaim that you've played one of the best games of the year. play

ANDROID JONES 2011
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The enemies are massive at times, requiring several blasts and exposing soft spots for defeat.



metroid prime

play rating ●●●●●

GC

developer: retro studios / publisher: nintendo / available: december

An awesome game in every way.

SMASH UP

The last thing to go through your mind will be your ass.

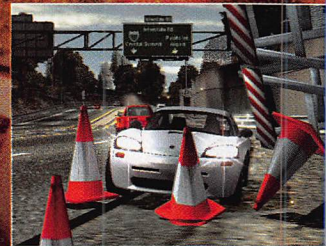


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"bigger... and more intense smash ups"
4.5/5 - GamePro



"For arcade racing fans, it just doesn't get any better than this."
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Mild Violence

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IMPACT

BURNOUTTM 2

POINT OF IMPACT



PlayStation 2

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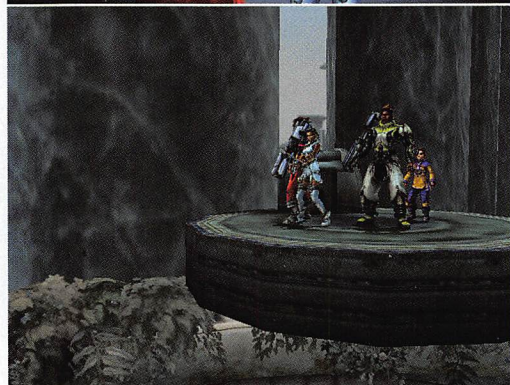
Koei's beautiful new adventure is wet and wild

CRIMSON SEA

words dave halverson



There's just no beating Koei when it comes to packing a screen with beauty



"The game's architecture immediately sets an aquatic tone..."

Are you ready for not just another bug hunt? *Crimson Sea* is Koei's latest in what's becoming a trend, moving away from their stock and trade (historical simulations) even further, beyond frenetic action, applying their ability to mass-populate the screen into the adventure realm. Of course, they required a hook for their excursion, and they've wisely chosen a sci-fi aquatic theme, resulting in a liquid enemy, capable of everything that springs to mind by that concept (visions of the T-1000 or the alien in Cameron's *Abyss*) and loaded it with a babe factor that reads off the charts. Intrigued? You should be.

After witnessing the spontaneous disintegration of the people of Theophilus, the scene shifts to what appears to be just a couple of bounty hunters trying to keep the lights on—the poster child for neo-Tokyo punk chic, Sho, and his partner, the peppy little Yangqin. In typical gumshoe fashion—where sexy babe hires lowly private eyes—they're offered a simple retrieval job by God's gift to videogame vixens, Live-D. Of course, as soon as they seize the item, the jig is up and they find themselves new recruits in the people's army of which Live-D is in command. Time to kick some Muton ass.

Beyond the initial story, which unfolds through gameplay and real-time cinemas, the technology at work borders on spectacular, with in-game models that look better than a lot of CG, and environments bathed in monotone hues, covered in thin layers of liquid. The game's architecture immediately sets an aquatic tone, and Sho's nimble model does the rest, with a strafe, *Shinobi*-style dash effect, lock-on shooting, and a *Strider*-style blade attack. The engine is a tad jumpy at times and the strafe isn't as defined as I'd like, but these issues will likely be dealt with given the polished nature of everything else. *Crimson's* other hooks lie in the team aspect of the gameplay (people you come across join you in battle) and, of course, the amazing ability to put over 1,000 characters onscreen at once, which I've yet to see but can't wait to cut into. Most innovative, however, is the game's motion-tracker utensil, a sensor that picks up sonar, cluing you in to the enemies' whereabouts through sound and controller vibration. Their liquid form allows them to blend in with the populous, so often times, the only way to catch them is through Dolby 5.1 and subtle vibration. Now you should definitely be intrigued. **play**



crimson sea

preview

XB

developer: koei / publisher: koei / available: december

As Koei continues to diversify with each new game they prove themselves a true jack of all trades

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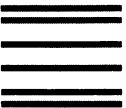
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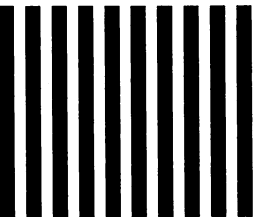
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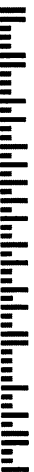
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Activision cruises on Cruise and still scores with

MINORITY REPORT

words dave halverson

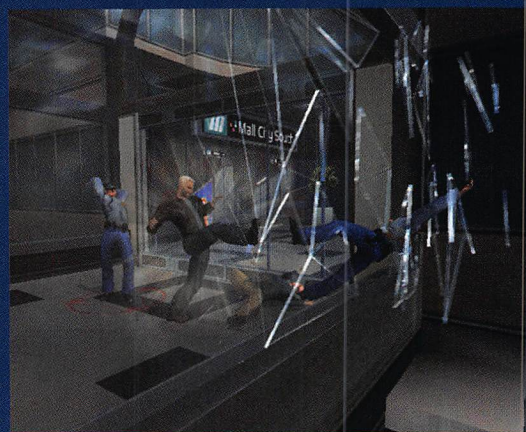
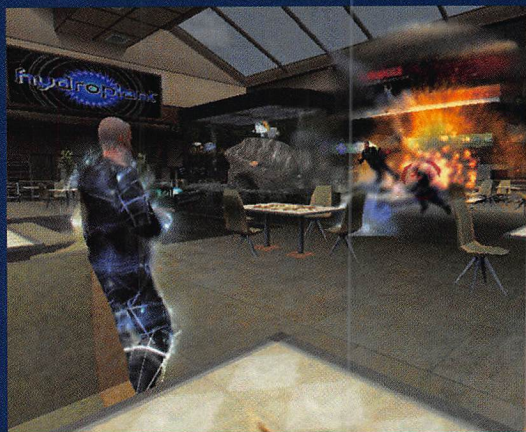
Wouldn't it be cool if you knew when a game was going to tank so you could go back in time and cancel it before it came out? Not that it would be necessary with Activision's *Minority Report*, even if the buzz has been that of a dead bee. Activision has kept the game under wraps a little longer than usual but only because all of the components came together at the tail end of development, which has become a kind of tradition as far as Treyarch is concerned. As a critic, I actually prefer to wait until a game is at least somewhat indicative of its final form before performing the big hands on preview anyway; and in *Minority Report's* case, it was worth the wait, especially given it's among my favorite sci-fi films of all time.

Looking gorgeous on a pumped-up version of the *Spider-Man* engine, the game follows the exploits of Pre-Crime top cop John Anderton, although the producers don't adopt the Tom Cruise physique. Rather, JA in the game looks more like Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Everything else, however, is indicative of the film, with an emphasis on hand-to-hand combat, the concussion rifle, and the jet pack—all worked into the action skillfully by Treyarch. The hand-to-hand affords strong and weak attacks, blocking,

and low and high sweeps, but also, a drag and hold that allows you to abuse pummeled limp bodies by either beating them in the head, kneeling them in the balls, or throwing them like a rag doll into your obstacle of choice—down stairs, through glass or fire...there's nothing quite like a dead, limp body when you need to clear a path.

On the weapons beat, the concussion rifle looks and sounds as it does in the film, bellowing out a mighty "thunk!" and you can see the burning emission smoldering just behind the propulsion of the jet pack—so nice. The environments look Spielbergian, too, with flat screens blinking away floor to ceiling, glass everywhere, and wall-to-wall monochrome hues. They even market to you like in the movie ("Hello Mr.—or Mrs.—**play** reader. We have your new issue"... someday!) Great care was taken, making sure that *Minority Report* lives up to its namesake. At this point, we've only sampled a few of its levels, but it's already got Activision's web master beat. **play**

In *Minority Report*, you go forward in time to kick ass, no need to take names—you have them.



"Great care was taken, making sure *Minority Report* lives up to its namesake."



minority report

PS2 XB

developer: treyarch / publisher: activision / available: q4

preview

Treyarch, the shop behind the mega-hit *Spider-Man* game, fix their gaze on yet another action-packed blockbuster.

The ultimate off-road driving adventure is heading to the Nintendo GameCube™ this summer! With five massive levels, a huge new arsenal of countermeasures and split-screen multiplayer action for up to four players, working for an elite band of smugglers has never been more exciting or dangerous. Make the drop, hit the nitro boost and get across the border before all hell breaks loose!

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Violence



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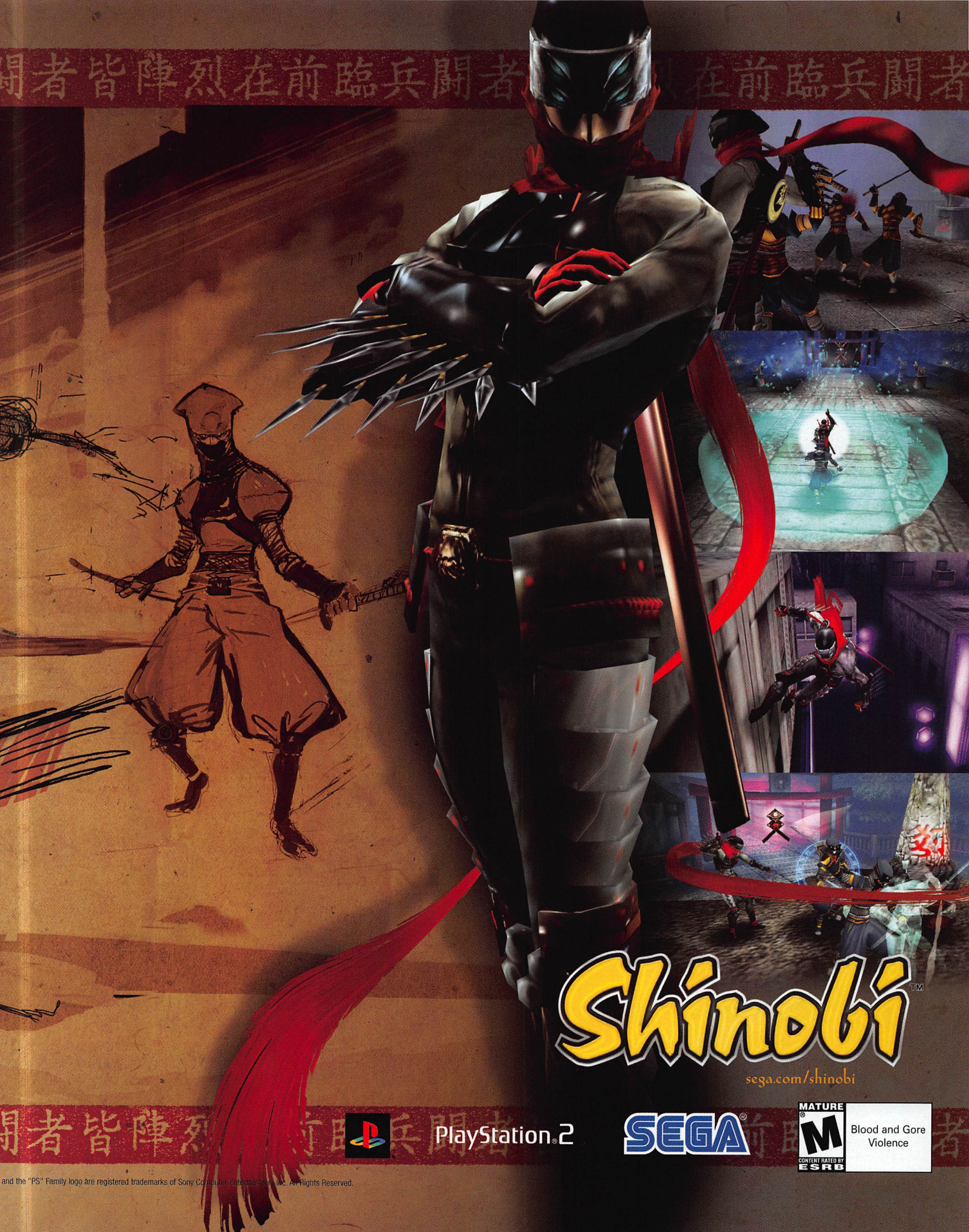
You can't fight
what you can't see.



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PlayStation 2



Blood and Gore
Violence

Keep your hands out of your pockets

DEAD OR ALIVE

XTREME BEACH VOLLEYBALL

words tom ham

So you've just developed one of the most technically advanced fighting games around. Complex fighting combos, lush worlds and—oh yes—let's not forget the bevy of beautiful female fighters whose breasts defy gravity. So what do you work on next? Those same hotties playing volleyball, of course!

Presenting *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, a quasi-sports action game that will undoubtedly bring a smile to your face. The concept is as pure as a naked body: All the female fighters from *Dead or Alive 3* shed their arena-fighting attire and trade them in for bikinis. "Is that game for real?" Fred Durst, lead singer of Limp Bizkit, asked me at a party last year, a question millions of other gamers were probably scratching their heads over, too. "'Cause if it is, I'm getting me an Xbox!" Yes, Fred, it's for real. Go buy your Xbox.

And believe it or not, *DOAX* has a storyline. When *Dead or Alive* fighter Zack wins big in Las Vegas, he invests in his own tropical paradise, dubbing it Zack Island (go figure). Showing that he's a nice guy, he invites all the women fighters to the resort for an intense volleyball tournament. There are two modes: Main and Versus, with the earlier being the heart and soul of the game. Here, players will compete and progress through volleyball matches, earning points as they win, which can be used for a number of things—specifically, to purchase skimpy bikinis, sunglasses and hats; in all, there are over 100 different bathing suits and 50 accessories to choose from. *Sports Illustrated*, eat your heart out.

Although Sega's *Beach Spikers* is a good game in its own right, it's still not the ultimate in beach volleyball. *DOAX* actually plays like an authentic volleyball game, with the speed and ferocity of the match setting it apart from all the competition; in fact, the fast-action flow is incredibly reminiscent of *DOA3*. The major flaw in Sega's more arcade-y romp is that there is too much time given to the player to react to where the ball is going to land, but there's no such luxury in *DOAX*. Within an instant, players literally have to decide where to place their shot; plus, you can change the type of shot you're going to execute on the fly (i.e. you can jump toward the net and look like your going to spike the ball, but then you can lightly tap it over at the last second). Simply brilliant.

As for the graphics, judge 'em for yourself. As the ol' saying goes: an exclusive screenshot is worth a thousand words. Just try not to drool. **play**

"An exclusive screenshot is worth a thousand words. Just try not to drool."



BEHIND THE THONG



He's elusive. He's confident. Some call him a rockstar (because he's always wearing sunglasses). Only a rare few have ever seen his eyes. He's created one of the most technically advanced and revealing fighting games. He has shown us that beautiful women can kick major ass. And early next year, he's going to change the face of action sports games forever. His name is **Tomonobu Itagaki, Executive Officer and General Manager Creative Division of Team Ninja**. He's not only responsible for the *Dead or Alive* franchise, but he's also overseeing the next generation of *Ninja Gaiden* as well. At this year's Tokyo Game Show, **play** had a chance to sit down with Itagaki. Not only did we get some insider info on *DOAX*, we found out the real deal about the infamous "nude code."

What was your inspiration for a *Dead or Alive* volleyball game? It's a big contrast from a fighting game.

Itagaki: If I use figure skating as an example, *DOAX* is like freestyle skating. Total free-form, any style you want. *DOA3* is more regimented, scored and structured. After *DOA3*, I wanted to create something more fun and light-hearted.

***Dead or Alive 3* definitely had a learning curve to it, with all the counters and reversals. Is *DOAX* going to be more approachable for players? Is there going to be a lot of replay value in *DOAX*?**

Yes, for *DOAX*, there will be less of a time commitment. *DOA3* required the player to devote a lot of time to learn and master the moves. For *DOAX*, it will take a third of the time. Also, I've spent three years on localization to ensure *DOAX* has endless hours of replay value. I always get requests from the Tecmo U.S. office, always stressing the importance of replay value [laughs]. I've put in many unlockable items and bonuses. You'll be able to play this game forever [laughs].

The European sales people are begging for it [laughs]! If that is the case, everyone will be importing the PAL version and the U.S. version won't sell. And I want to say now that there is no topless mode or "see through" bikini in *DOAX*. There is no such thing. However, the characters have such exotic-looking clothes in the game, it's actually better than seeing them in the nude. The way the costumes are designed and how the girls are wearing it in the game—it's really nice.

Who was the lucky bastard that got to program the breast physics in the game?

My best guy! [Laughs] He's an absolute genius with physics and calculations. There is a fine line when developing a game like this. Of course, you want the physics to be realistic, but you don't want to make the breasts too real. Remember, this is fantasy.

Is this the same engine that was used in *DOA3*?

No, it is a completely new engine. It is 30% more powerful than the engine used in *DOA3*. In *DOA3*,

"I want to say now that there is no topless mode or 'see through' bikini in *DOAX*. There is no such thing." —Tomonobu Itagaki, Team Ninja

Are there any differences between the U.S. and Japanese versions?

After checking out Tecmo Inc.'s website forum after *DOA3* came out, a lot of the criticisms were addressing the fact that U.S. gamers didn't like having a lesser version of a game of what Japanese gamers have gotten. So I decided to make both versions identical.

Are all the female characters from *DOA3* going to be in *DOAX*? Can we look forward to any new characters?

Yes, all of the female characters return from *DOA3*. As for new characters, we're introducing Lisa, an American volleyball player. The U.S. audience has been very supportive of *DOA3*. I wanted to give something back to the fans.

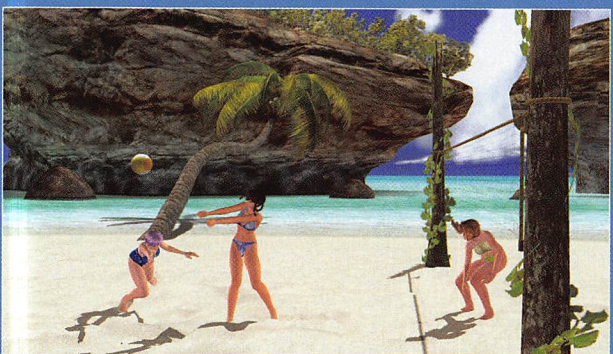
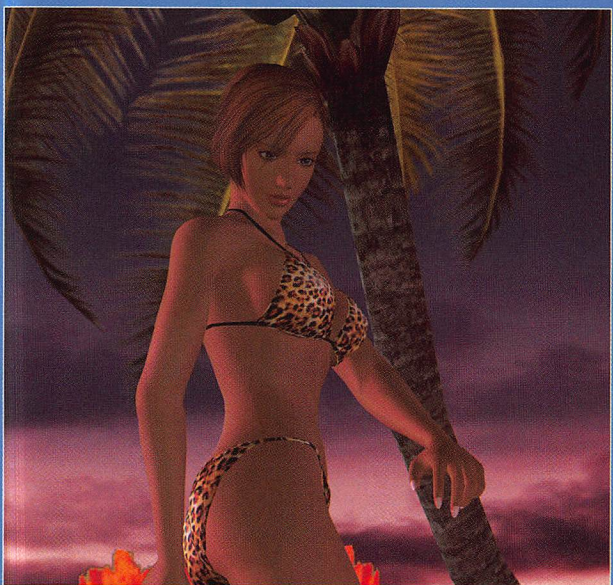
OK, I'm going to put you on the spot here. Is there going to be a "nude code" in *DOAX*?

[Laughs] Everybody asks this question! From all regions and all different areas of this industry. In fact, my direct boss here at Tecmo Inc. tells me that I shouldn't do this [laughs]! I know that some industry folks in the U.S. want the nude code, but I still say "no for other reasons."

we had a maximum of three characters on the screen at the same time. For *DOAX*, we have four characters at once. We have to account for more polygons and characters onscreen; plus, given the fact that all of the characters are moving at the same time. And when we come out with *DOA4*, we will have to develop another one.

Will *DOAX* appeal to the hardcore gamer or the casual gamer?

First of all, I want everyone to understand that Team Ninja is very dedicated in creating the best possible content. When we have concept meetings, our ultimate goal is to create a game that can be enjoyed by anyone around the world. Just by picking up the controller, you can play it. This was the case in *DOA3* and it will carry over to *DOAX*. I want the game to be accessible for all ages. For men, as well as women. Playing beach volleyball requires speed and quick reflexes; this will attract the hardcore player. Other volleyball games are too slow. I make fast fighting games, so this game will be much faster than others. And if a player wants to play a more relaxed game of volleyball, they will be allowed to do so. *DOAX* is very open-ended. **play**



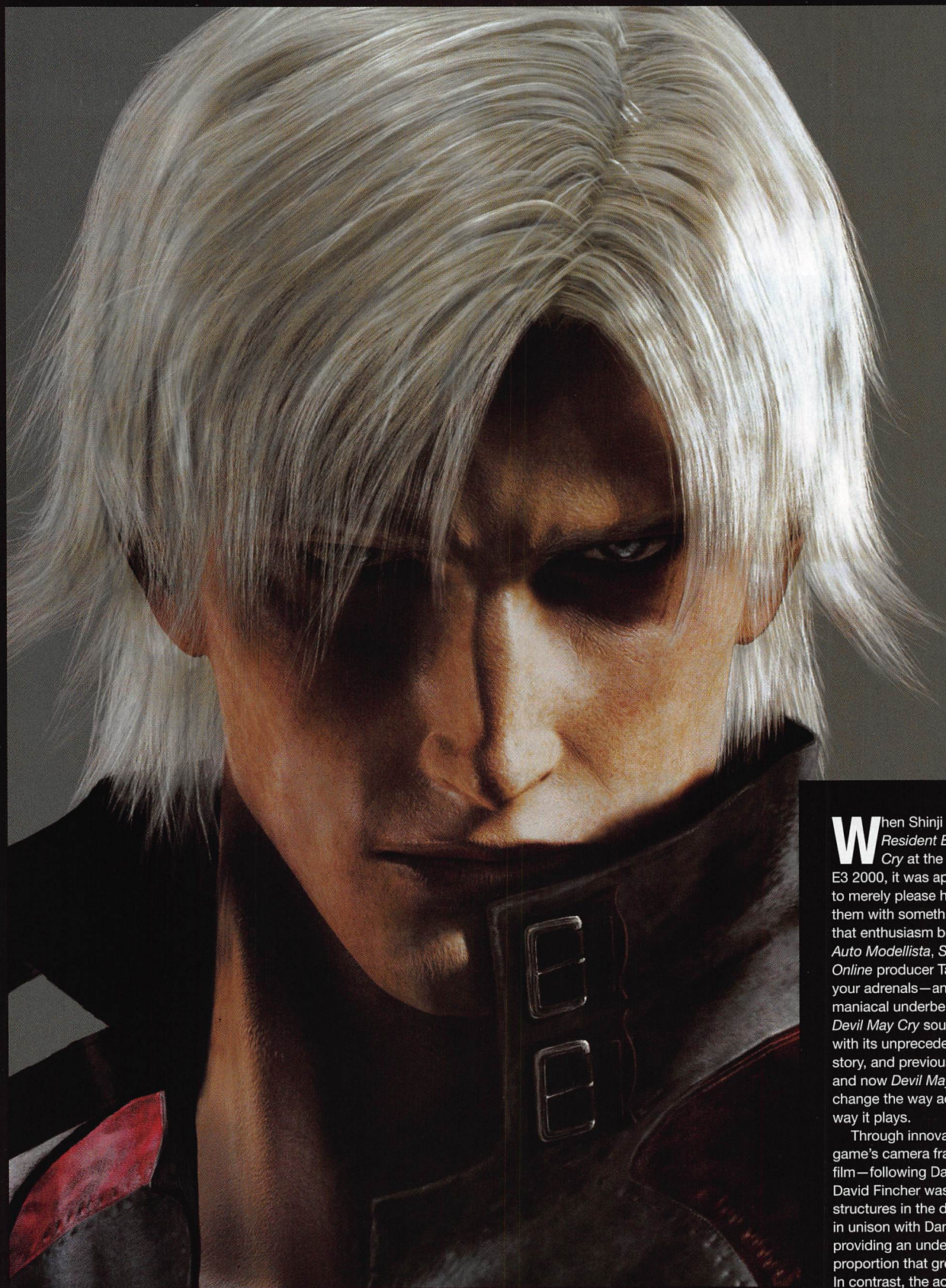
dead or alive xtreme beach volleyball

preview

XB

developer: tecmo of japan/team ninja / publisher: tecmo / available: january

Pick your mouth up from the floor; you're embarrassing your friends.



When Shinji Mikami (the architect of *Resident Evil*) demonstrated *Devil May Cry* at the Sony press conference during E3 2000, it was apparent that his aim was not to merely please his audience, but to assault them with something wickedly innovative. What that enthusiasm began, *Devil May Cry 2* (from *Auto Modellista*, *Street Fighter*, *Resident Evil Online* producer Tanaka) now mainlines into your adrenals—an action game that tickles your maniacal underbelly every second that you play. *Devil May Cry* sought to reinvent action gaming with its unprecedented fighting system, integral story, and previously unseen level of detail, and now *Devil May Cry 2* endeavors to not only change the way action looks, but once again, the way it plays.

Through innovative new techniques, the game's camera frames the action more like a film—following Dante down his dark path as if David Fincher was at the helm. Massive gothic structures in the distance slowly dolly zoom in unison with Dante's forward progression, providing an understated yet awesome sense of proportion that greatly heightens the experience. In contrast, the action is boundless, blowing the

words dave halverson

The devil made them do it

DEVIL MAY CRY 2



Gothic greatness: Nobody does it better.

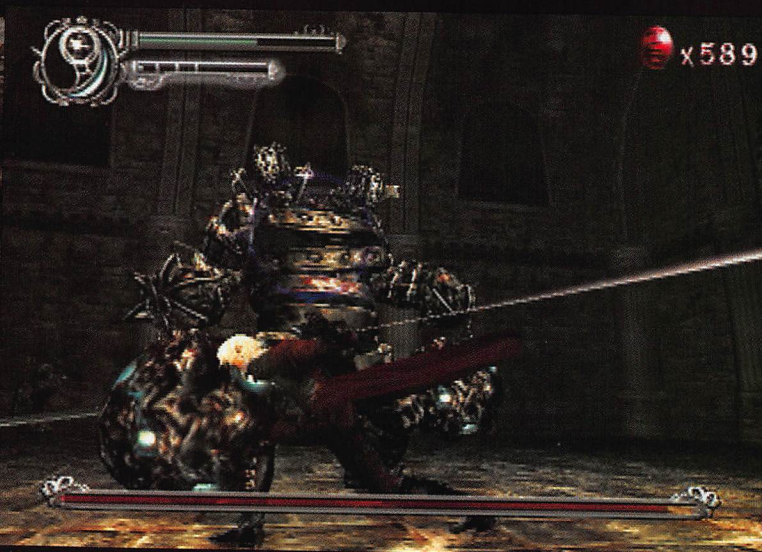
lid off of conventional parameters. Dante's acrobatics are super-supernatural—running up walls, lofting high into the sky, sustaining his hover with gunfire, and warping time with the thrust of his blade; other action heroes will soon cower in his wake.

The two-level demo I played culminated with a boss encounter that conjured visions of the greatest ever, baited me with visions of a lethal new female lead, and left me with the notion that if this *Devil* cried in '02, it would challenge

Rygar for action game of the year.

No company has been able to sustain the kind of quality Capcom has from 8-bit to present day. From *Mega Man*, *Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, *Bionic Commando* and *Strider* to *Street Fighter*, *Resident Evil*, *Maximo*, *Breath of Fire*, *Steel Battalion* and on, they don't merely produce games, but milestones—building blocks for entire genres. *Devil May Cry 2* will further that tradition, slamming the door on gothic action and adventure for God knows how long. **play**

"Devil May Cry 2 endeavors to not only change the way action looks, but once again, how it plays."



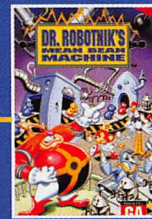
devil may cry 2

preview

PS2

developer: capcom / publisher: capcom / available: winter 2003

This and *Rygar* have raised the bar on action so high, my nose is still bleeding.



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Missed one.



All the jumps, thrills and loop-de-loops you'd expect from Sonic now in one speedy little package. Seven separate adventures to explore, one ring at a time.





The next killer app for Xbox?

PANZER DRAGOON ORTA

words michael hobbs

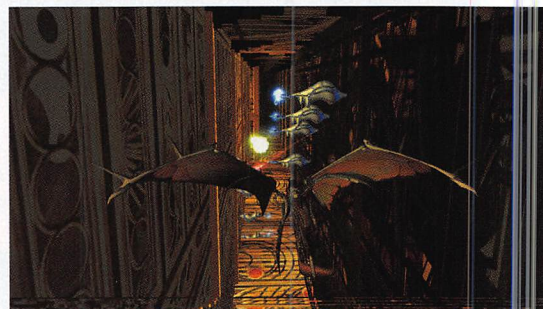
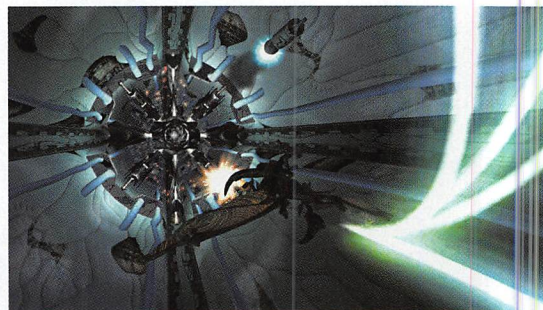
Next month we will be bringing you the final review of one of the most anticipated games of the season, Sega's *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, so to make the wait a little more bearable (or perhaps to make it more unbearable), we thought we would let you gorge yourself on these magnificent images of the game in action.

Like its exalted Sega Saturn predecessors, *Orta* is a pure shooter in the best sense of the genre. Though you are moving through a 3D space and there are multiple branching paths, the game is on rails, guiding you through some of the most extraordinary scenes of shooting bliss I've ever seen. Certainly there are those who might expect full freedom of movement in this modern era, but this would undoubtedly have been the wrong choice for the game. There is a level of visual presentation and excitement that can only be achieved when the creators have direct control of the experience. It's akin to the brilliance of *Devil May Cry* or *Rygar*, both of which would lose a good deal of their dramatic flair if the camera were just stuck behind the characters as they ran through the environments. In *Orta*, the massive talents at Smilebit are directing the action in such a way that they attain a level of coolness just not possible in a free-flying game. For example, enemy patterns here are like those in the best 2D shooters, and patterns just don't work unless you are flying along a fairly fixed path.

Of course, the other massive benefit of being on rails is the amount of visual splendor that can be grafted onto the play. Knowing exactly what's going to be seen and when allows the designers to tweak the imagery to each respective scene. And trust me, this game will blow you away visually. Think back to the awesome detailing of *Gun Valkyrie* and multiply that by ten.

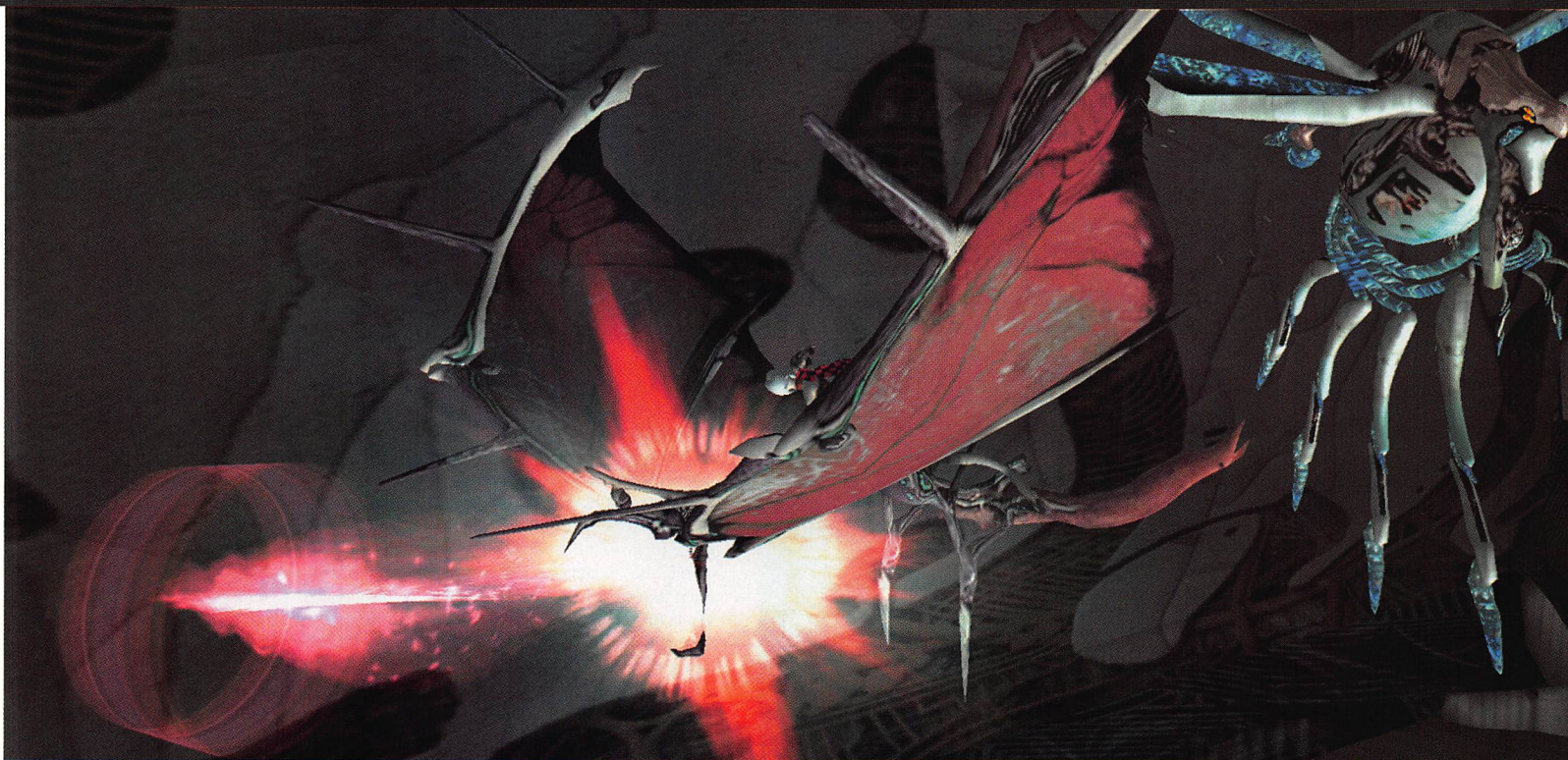
Had enough of my ranting? Wait till you read our review next month. **play**

Gorgeous graphics, beautiful music, perfect shooting action. Yep, it's Panzer alright.





"Like its exalted Saturn predecessors, *Orta* is a pure shooter in the best sense of the genre"



panzer dragoon orta

preview

XB

developer: smilebit / publisher: sega / available: november

The wait is almost over for *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, the best reason to own an Xbox since Halo. That's what I say.



Adamantium grin

X-MEN: WOLVERINE'S REVENGE

words jon m gibson

That furious stare, that trembling rage, that adamantium-laced fervor—it was only a matter of time before it was all assembled and the most temperamental of the X-Men got his own headlining role in an action-adventure. *Wolverine's Revenge* takes Logan—here, clad in his black-leather, big-screen threads—on a story that hits close to home. After discovering that the fatal X-Virus has been set loose in his bloodstream, Wolvie has a mere 48 hours to pilfer the antidote from the Weapon X facility in the secluded wilderness of Canada. Penned by comic-book writer Larry Hama (and exposed in real-time cut scenes), the time-bomb, fail-safe script lends itself to a lot of frenetic action.

From there, the combat system immediately takes on the feel of a *Crouching Tiger* ballet of brutality, coupled with the techno flair of *The Matrix* and *Charlie's Angels*. It's high-energy all the way through, incorporating a berserker mode in which Wolverine adopts his very primal instincts, slamming soldiers forcefully against walls, battering their corpses to his pulpy liking. But when he's not doped up on rage, he adopts a more "positional" battle stance. Targeting enemies with L1, a "strike" prompt will appear onscreen, warning when a combo attack is optimal. Hitting the right flow of buttons will launch Wolvie into a smooth, quick-jab-and-kick martial arts sequence, ending with a stylish fatality—a nasty impaling on Wolvie's claws comes to mind.

"Something we're especially proud of is the adamantium backbone of the game," boasts Craig Houston, internal producer, GenePool. "Third-person adventures are usually either weapon-based or have rather limited button-bashing combat systems. We wanted to try and bring some of the variety of more traditional fighting games into this genre and really make Wolvie an amazingly fun character to play. As well as having a set of basic combat moves and throws, Wolverine can pull off some spectacular attacks to take out multiple enemies at one time—something of a first in 3D action-adventure games. This is achieved by using a context-sensitive system

where particular animations are triggered depending on the proximity of those around you. By using this system, we are also able to include attacks that are specific to the particular enemy you are fighting. For example, when battling Juggernaut, if you're skillful, Wolverine can leap onto his shoulders and deliver a few well-placed strikes to the helmet—ouch!"

Everything is comparative to the way Wolverine fights in the surreal Marvel universe in which he was born. He's always been the recluse of Professor Xavier's heroic team of mutants, so with the frenzied combat set-up, Wolvie's animalistic behavior can finally be experienced first-hand. Sure, the attacks appear quite random at times, but his maneuvers never wander away from the player's complete authority.

As another additive, the GenePool crew of comic-book junkies has tapped into Wolverine's other mutant powers—besides his über-strength and hyper-healing. With the innovative "sense" mode, players are given a visual take on his most nasal of superhuman abilities. "Obviously, this is not an easy thing to visualize in a game. When you look at how movies portray enhanced vision, the effect nearly always seems to look less clear—more abstract—than normal fields of vision," Houston illustrates. "Coming up with a way to visually represent Wolverine's senses—one that actually provides real, practical information for the player—was one of the biggest challenges on the project. We went through a lot of experimentation, but the unique effect we've settled on seems to provide a nice contrast to other aspects of the game. Using his sense mode, Wolverine can track heat-prints and scent traces left by other characters, see hidden environmental hazards and booby traps, and perhaps most effectively for gameplay, see in the dark. The trick was finding how these features could be integrated without overshadowing or compromising

the character's more action-based abilities." The overall effect comes off like an infra-orange field of vision, allowing you to move among the shadows—to practice stealth like the bestial, animal-like creature that Wolverine is. In one sequence emphasizing the strategy elements of the game—not necessarily related to the sense features, but intriguing nonetheless—Wolvie must stray into a walk-in freezer to cool down his body before entering a heat-activated security zone.

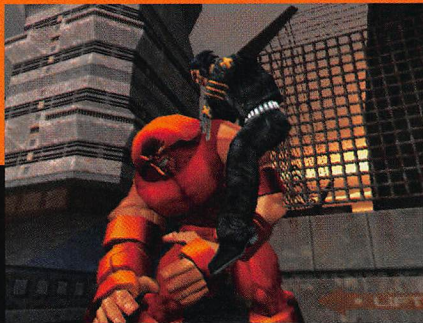
Along the way, you'll also fence claws with a variety of recognizable arch-villains—Sabretooth, Wendigo, Juggernaut, Omega Red, and the obligatory Magneto. Fellow X-Men Colossus and Beast will chime in from time to time; and Xavier furnishes gameplay hints via telepathic communiqué (in form of voice-over from Patrick Stewart). And even the unfamiliar foes have a distinct mien, outfitted in heavy neo-military gear and a pair of round, cat-like, green goggles.

"Marvel has been very involved and supportive, and has helped provide a lot of the original ideas for the game," Houston continues. "Wolverine 'guru' and writing legend Hama wrote a barnstorming script that allows us the opportunity to showcase some of the coolest characters from the X-Men universe—as well as a few surprises!" And the surprises should be welcomed, since the game so far is a very bright indication that fans will be radically pleased with the finished product; and even the less hardcore set will find gratification in an action-adventure that gives balance to the critter-dominated genre. **play**

"Coming up with a way to visually represent Wolverine's senses was one of the biggest challenges on the project."

—Craig Houston, producer

Take aim at a lineup of malicious foes, gashing into them with Wolvie's mean set of adamantium talons.



x-men: wolverine's revenge

preview



developer: genepool / publisher: activision / available: spring 2003

It's the first action-adventure since Activision grabbed the X-Men license, and so far it looks like *Wolverine's Revenge* will be the precursor for many more to come.

ATV QUAD POWER RACING 2

words dave halverson

Acclaim's been fiddling around with this *ATV Quad* license now for a few years and produced a pair of decent games, one for the PlayStation, and more recently one for the Game Boy Advance that ranks among its best racers—which isn't saying a whole lot. Somewhere, someone must have lit a fire under someone's arse and said "decent ain't gonna cut it" and you're looking at the result.

ATV Quad Power Racing 2 from Climax Motorsports (talk about your double conundrums) looks to have a shot at knocking *ATV Off-Road Fury* off of its high horse. The game's not due until February 2003, but judging by where it is currently, if that time is spent tweaking what's already here well, this game is going to be

something special. Chicks and quads my friends... chicks... and quads; that is a recipe for success if I've ever seen one. Whether you like 'em in short-shorts and bikini tops (road rash anyone?) or skin tight leathers, the girls definitely get in on this dirty action.

Most importantly, though (who am I fooling?), *Quad Power Racing 2* has three important things very dialed-in: buoyancy, a good physics model, and an effective and easy to use pre-load system for jumping. These are the building blocks of a strong ATV racer, says so right in the manual. Bicycling, stoppies, wheelies; all of the requisite ATV tricks are on board, and as you can see, it's built on a gorgeous frame with hyper-realistic textures and sa-weet models—one to watch for.

"Chicks and quads... that is a recipe for success if I've ever seen one."



There's nothing quite like a hot muddy chick on a quad to make you love the great outdoors

atv quad power racing 2

PS2 GC XB

developer: climax motorsports
publisher: acclaim
available: q1 2003

Acclaim's ATV brand is closing in on greatness.

preview

DIE HARD: VENDETTA

words brady fletcher

The next in a long line of first-person shooters percolating for the holiday season is *Die Hard: Vendetta*, yet another John McClane slaughter parade with the requisite guns, terrorists, explosions, blood and one-liners. That last one is treading over newly profane ground: "You sick motherf—ker" screams the irascible McClane after a death shot, along with many other colorful phrases. Oh, the next-generation of gaming.

Most of the action here is familiar first-person mayhem, but what separates the game from the competition is an emphasis on dialogue and character interaction. The intention is to put you into a more movie-like environment, where the sights and sounds are accompanied by tons of talk, inspired by characters and

ideas from the *Die Hard* movies. As the game opens, you must make your way into a terrorist-infested art museum where the curator has been accosted and hostages struggle for their lives. It takes a while to get used to slowing down and taking time to listen to all the chattering that ensues amidst the violence, but there is no doubt that the game will benefit greatly from the storytelling.

In the end, *Vendetta* still hinges on discharging your weapon, which is even stylized with some slow-mo impact shots. Taking out the opposition with a solid efficiency rewards you with Hero Points, freeze-framing the enemy for a free reign of violence. Cool idea for a promising game.

"You sick motherf—ker" screams an irascible McClane after a death shot."



Vendetta, unlike *Die Hard Trilogy*, finally puts players in McClane's shoes (if he's wearing 'em).

die hard: vendetta

PS2 GC XB

developer: bit studios
publisher: sierra
available: december

I'm always up for a good first-person shooter, and this one is definitely on the road to success.

preview

GUNGRAVE™

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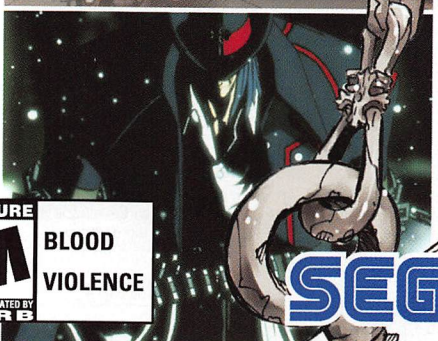
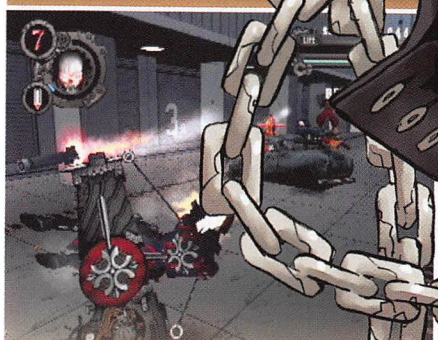
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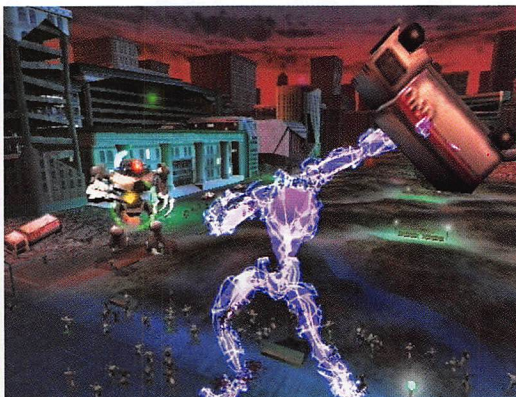


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PlayStation 2®

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War of the Monsters

PS2

developer: incog / publisher: scea / available: q1 2003

JG says *War of the Monsters* is all that and a bag of potato chips, so tune into his mammoth feature next issue and judge for yourself.

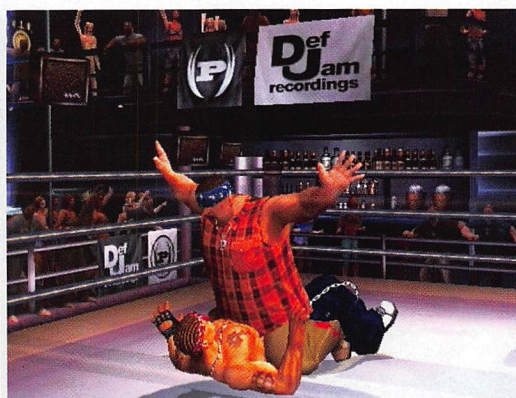


The Hobbit

GC

developer: inevitable ent. / publisher: sierra / available: q2 2003

One of '93's most anticipated games, Sierra's *The Hobbit* is said to play as well as *Zelda* and look even better. We're zeroing in on a feature-sized preview.



Def Jam Wrestling

PS2

developer: ea / publisher: ea / available: q1 2003

It's branding gone wild as EA hooks up with Def Jam to throw down the bling-bling wrestling style, packed with enough hard knocks to make the People's Champion throw in the towel.



Blood Omen

GC

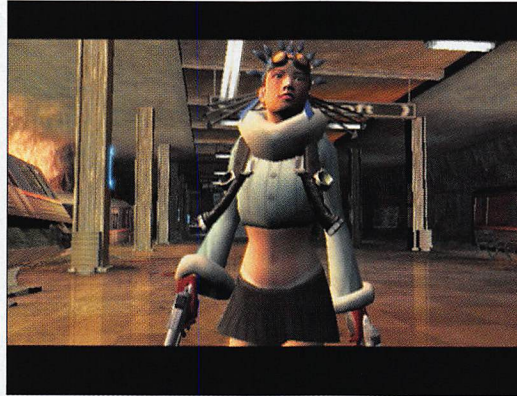
developer: crystal d / publisher: eidos / available: q4

Kain isn't done yet. Apparently, he wanted one more shot to sink his fangs into Uma—who wouldn't? Let's hope the M-rated action flows on GC as well as it did on Xbox.

Hunter The Reckoning

GC

developer: digital mayhem / publisher: interplay / available: q4

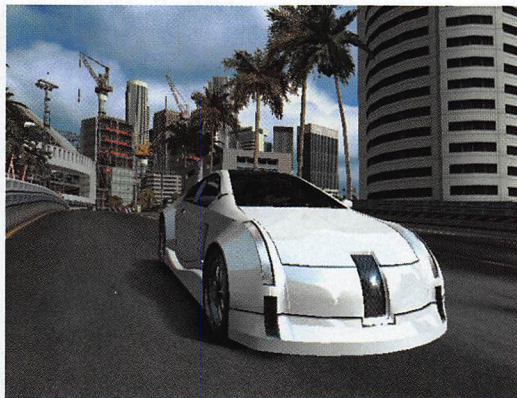


In an effort to get young boys to purchase GameCubes, Kassandra Cheyung shows her underpants for all to see. For shame! How much is GameCube again?

Apex

XB

developer: infogrames / publisher: atari / available: q1 2003



With a deep story mode, dozens of vehicles and over 50 tracks, Atari is touting their ground-breaking new racer, Apex, for Xbox as the deepest ever. We're test driving it

Final Fantasy X-2

PS2

developer: square / publisher: square / available: summer 2003



Ignore the totally bizarre naming of this sequel to Final Fantasy X and prepare for a new, action-oriented addition to the FF legacy. Yuna stars.

Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicle

GC

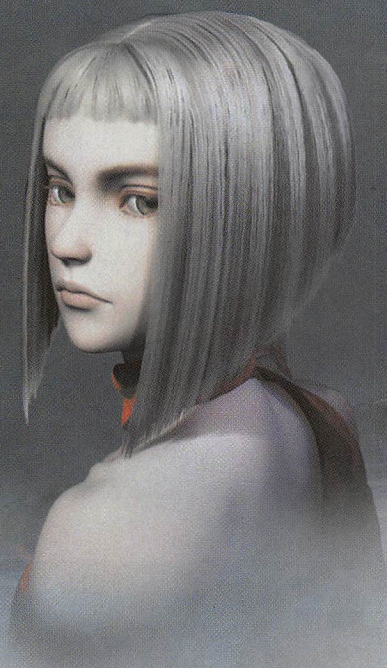
developer: square_game developer studios / publisher: square / available: TBA



Yes, the Final Fantasy series is coming to a Nintendo console, and this wonderful looking little game should capture some of the ambience that made FFX a play favorite



*From the Shadows of history,
a Legend reawakens.*



Animated Blood
Violence





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It's time to blow stuff way up

RED FACTION 2

words brady fiechter

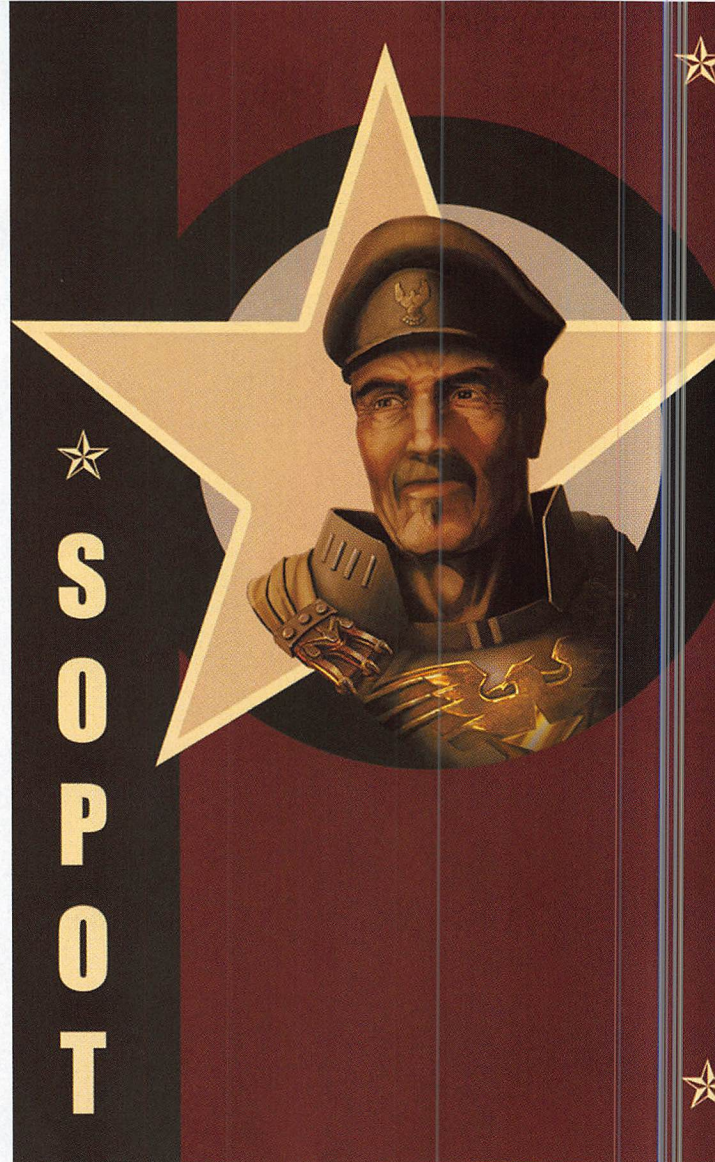
Red faction hit with unexpected impact when it was released early in the PS2's life cycle, burying its missteps underneath the newness of having a 128-bit first-person experience. This greatly improved sequel takes many of the parts that made the first so strong, throws away a lot of the scrap, and shapes one of the best first-person shooters around.

When you boil any game in this genre down to its essence, the basic structure and thrust is universal: shoot scores of heavily armed crimesters, blow stuff up *real* good, and find cool weapons to blow stuff up even better.

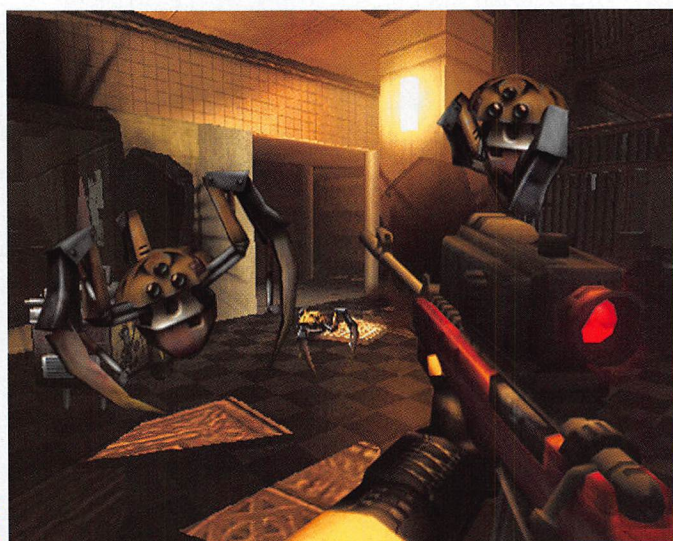
What *Red Faction* manages to do is actually add an extra charge to the destruction, employing its "geo-mod" technology. Where most first-person shooters contain the violence within direct enemy confrontations, in *Red Faction 2*, you get to decimate almost anything you see—walls, floors, vehicles, tables, chairs. If you can't go around something, blow it up. In *Red Faction*, the action dynamic wasn't really changed all that much from this newfound freedom of destruction, but here there is a lot more effect on your progressive strategy.

I really enjoyed the way the first game detailed its story of revolting miners, but *Red Faction 2* drops its intriguing setup and does little to draw off the storytelling, letting the action do all the talking. Rebels flood the streets and corridors in wicked force, incurring the wrath of your awesome assortment of military-grade weaponry: the incendiary grenades are especially effective, lighting up anyone within their huge blast radius, and I love the electromagnet gun, which penetrates solid objects for instant kills. Enemies move with good skill and intelligence, which makes the exceptionally honed control scheme a grateful presence.

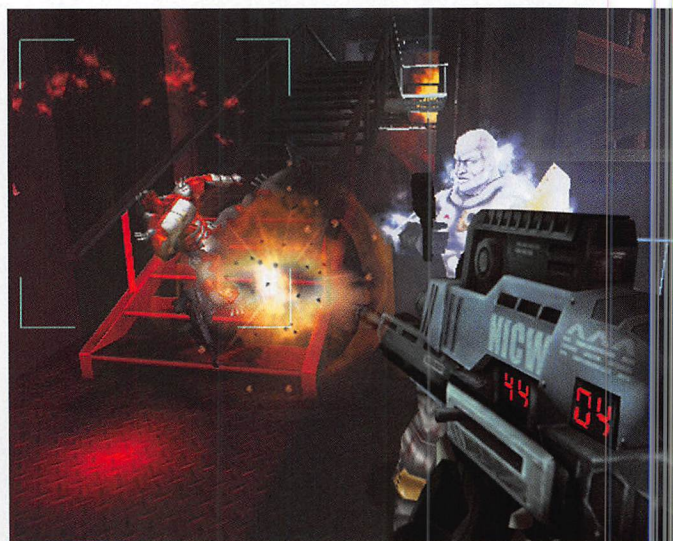
Red Faction 2 looks great, dwarfing its predecessor with impressive lighting and inventive settings, which become even more interesting as the game progresses. The design can be a bit generic at times, carrying an assembly line aesthetic, but the game as a whole hits hard with its visual impact. As a more traditional first-person shooter with the invaluable geo-mod twist, *Red Faction 2* is an exceptional thrill. **play**



"The game looks great, dwarfing its predecessor with impressive lighting and inventive settings..."



The visual improvements over *Red Faction* are extraordinary.



red faction 2

PS2

developer: volition / publisher: thq / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

Improving upon the original in almost every way—story needs some work—*Red Faction 2* is awesome.

ToeJam & Earl

MISSION TO EARTH

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Big
Speakers

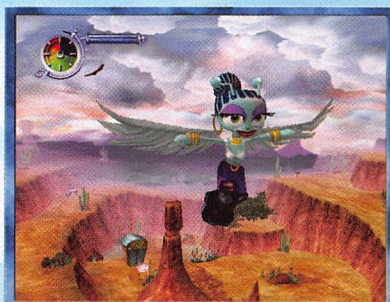
Big Earl

ToeJam

Latisha

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ToeJam & Earl
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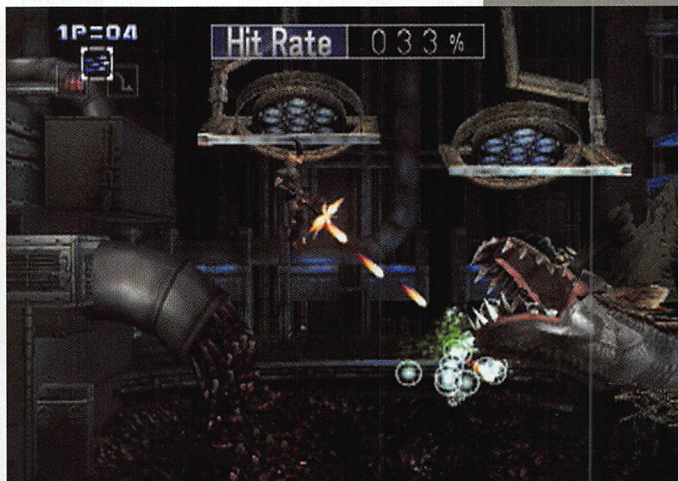
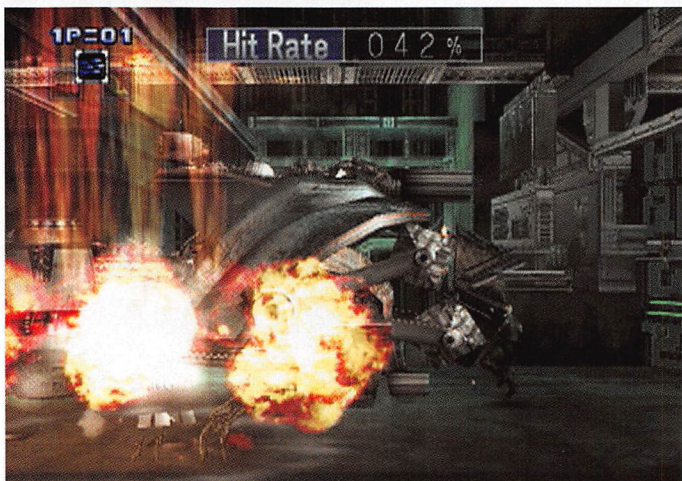
TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

COMIC MISCHIEF
MILD LANGUAGE

The soft need not apply

CONTRA: SHATTERED SOLDIER

words brady fiechter



Blink and you die. The screen gets riddled with chaotic action.

"Contra is not going to cause anyone to question the virtues of the modern way of designing games, but it certainly is an awesome jolt of old-school gaming."



When I asked *Contra*'s producer, Nobuya Nakazato, if he believed 2D would soon be entirely obsolete, he looked at me with an admirable conviction and said that, with this latest in a very long-running, very cherished action series, the gaming community would take notice and see how overblown and shallow a lot of 3D gaming is. He wanted a game that was fast, basic, gameplay-driven yet still dazzled the eyes, and he wanted to show how the purity of the classics has been lost. He's succeeded on most accounts.

Contra: Shattered Soldier is not going to cause anyone to question the virtues of the modern way of designing games, but it certainly is an awesome jolt of old-school gaming that belongs in any seasoned gamer's stockpile. It captures the crazy intensity and sweat-inducing fun of the 8- and 16-bit *Contras* and looks, sounds and plays great.

The game is structured so that you can pick any four of the seven levels immediately, mastering one stage before tackling another. *Contra* is not ruthlessly difficult thanks to the addition of an easy setting and eight lives since our preview of the game in our August cover story, but it does ramp up the difficulty once you unlock the final stages. Put it on the hard setting and you'll wish you had a larger selection of curse words to choose from.

Like the classic originals, *Contra* begs to be played with a friend, which actually can make the game a little more frustrating yet

even more enjoyable; it can be hard to keep track of the tiny characters onscreen and the chaos pushes you apoplectic.

Contra was designed for replay value, and you will find yourself picking the game up again after you've finished it, but it is still a very short ride with levels that can go down in five minutes if you're good. It's going to take a very long time to master, which is the whole idea, with a scoring system judging your skilled progression, but I could have used a lot more meat to dig into.

Armed with a flame thrower, machine gun and grenade launcher, your weapon system is constant from start to finish, with no upgrades or changes in impact; pick your favorite and hold down the button. Of course, anyone who has played a *Contra* knows that it's simple on the surface but the patterns the enemies travel through are brilliantly formed, engaging that angle of your gaming senses that lies dormant these days. And it's a kick just to look at what crazy entity is thrown at you next. The designers obviously reveled in toying with stylistic excess, forming boss creations that puke, slink, explode, ooze and drip when living and move with endless parts and joints when mechanical. Boss encounters make up most of the game's source of conflict, leaving only a few short stretches of combat with smaller enemies in between. For what it sets out to accomplish, *Contra* is a blast. **play**

contra: shattered soldier

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

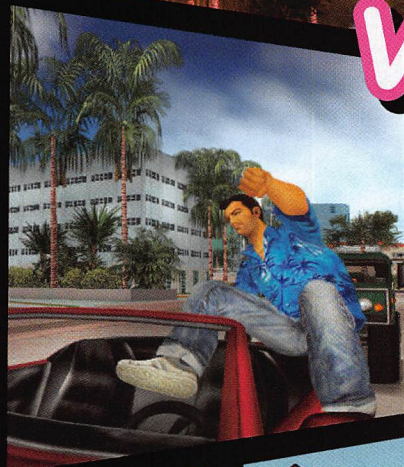
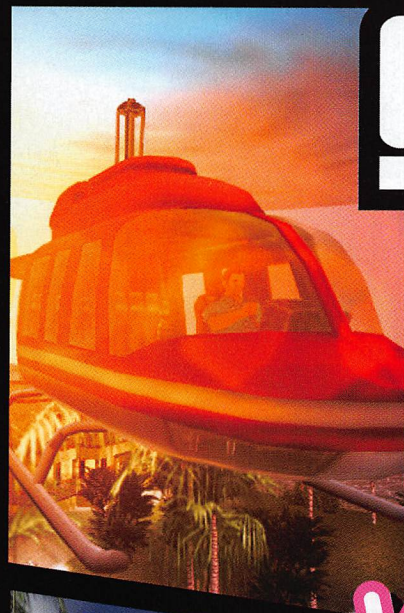
developer: kcet / publisher: konami / available: now

Contra: Shattered Soldier is the most faithful translation of a classic yet, but there's no denying that the difficulty will turn some off.

PlayStation®2

Grand Theft Auto

Vice City



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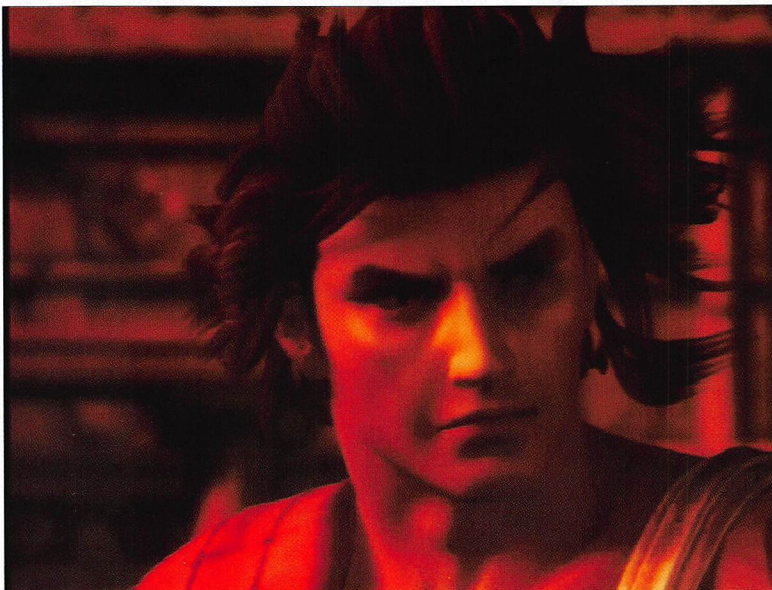
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Prepare to be amazed

RYGAR

THE LEGENDARY ADVENTURE

words dave halverson

Tecmo has been a top-tier developer/publisher since the dawn of modern gaming, but they've been out of the action game for what seems like an eternity, working on *Gallop Racer*, *Monster Rancher*, *DoA*, and odd one-offs like *Fatal Frame* and *Unison*. After so much time wishing and waiting for a *Ninja Gaiden* sequel, they'd dropped off my radar to some degree, until screens of the new *Ninja Gaiden* began to emerge... not exactly what I had in mind but, nevertheless, an opportunity to drink from Tecmo's cup was again on the horizon. Lo and behold, a game I considered a precursor to my upcoming reunion with Ryu Hayabusa, *Rygar: The Legendary Adventure* has stopped me dead in my tracks and awakened a dormant gaming gene I'd forgotten I even had. The question is: How is this so much better than everything else in the category? And if *Rygar*—from the team responsible for *Fatal Frame* and *Monster Rancher*—is this superlative, what might *Ninja Gaiden* bring?

Just as they did on the NES with *Ninja Gaiden*, where they seemingly elevated the hardware specs, they are doing on the PS2, only with *Rygar*—a game I came to love on the Atari Lynx, of all systems, back in 1990 (although the game's arcade roots date back to 1986). It's funny; in hindsight, if you played *Rygar* on the Atari Lynx, were cryogenically frozen, and then handed a controller to play this game upon reanimation, you'd think you had been asleep for 50 years—either that or died and gone to heaven (once you figured out what those two posts were sticking out of the controller, that is).

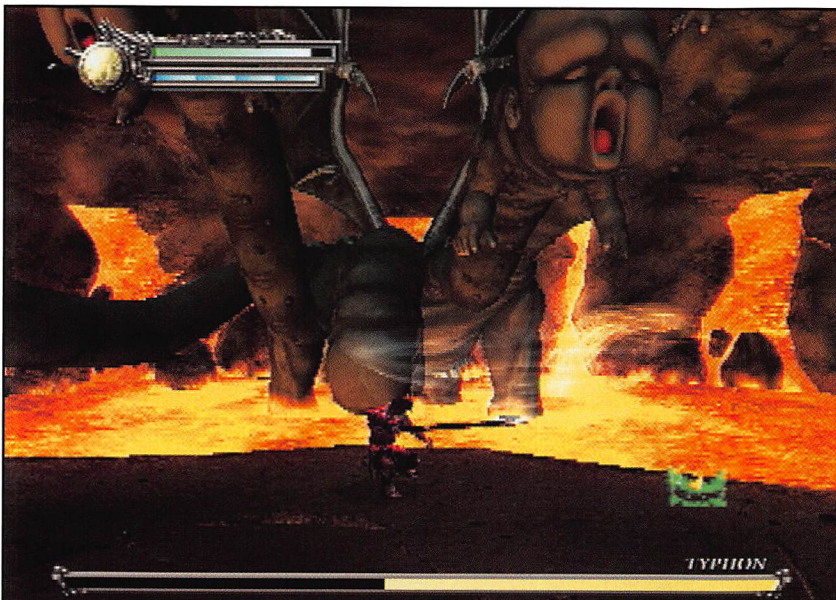
Imagine the visual pageantry of *Devil May Cry* populated with characters along the lines of *Dead or Alive*, applied to a Greco-Roman era action-adventure that encompasses a perfect balance of everything we love about the category—platforming, swinging and grappling, exploration, fighting, dramatic angles, epic boss battles, and enough magic moments to last a lifetime. Within the confines of *Rygar* lie shades of *Metroid*, *Castlevania*, *Zelda*, and *DoA*—the best of the best—in settings that defy the hardware, accompanied by music that insures it will own you from the very first note to the bittersweet last. I actually stopped and gave thanks several times as I was playing. Sick, huh?



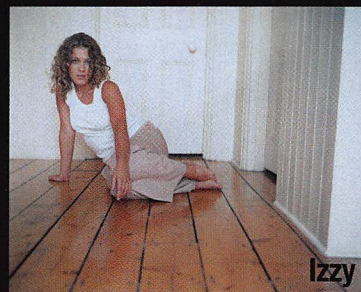
Princess Harmonia bursts into song in one of the game's many beautiful segues.

The premise of the game has Rygar saving Princess Harmonia after she's snatched away by Titans during a ceremony in Rygar's honor for delivering victory to his homeland of Argus. The attack rips the island apart and Rygar is swallowed by the underworld where he learns that it is his destiny to wield the almighty diskarmor—seriously cool hardware—to pound down the Titans and return Argus to peace. Initially, you'll swing it to simply thrash enemies, but over the course of the game you will come to adore it, using it for combo attacks, swinging, grappling, and creating all sorts of mayhem. Nothing in this game is soft—nothing: You can bash and whip everything, sending much of it crumbling to the ground. This is as close to being unleashed in a real environment as you will ever be, driven home by the best camera work I have ever witnessed. If you read somewhere that it is less than perfection, use the page to wipe your crack and burn the rest. Within the confines of this game you will witness gorgeous cinemas, be moved by the best score this year, and dine on level design that is second to none. *Rygar* is my action game of the year by a ridiculous margin. Absolutely, under no circumstances, can you afford to miss it. **play**

"Imagine the visual pageantry of *Devil May Cry* populated with characters along the lines of *Dead or Alive*, applied to a Greco-Roman era action-adventure..."



Epic bosses compliment the most satisfying 3D action perhaps ever. Bottom right, find Rygar in the shot...uh-huh, that's real time.



Izzy

Lending her vocal talents to the game's beautiful hymn sung by princess Harmonia is UK recording sensation **Izzy**, a classically-trained vocalist whose amazing career started when she was just four. She has recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra and has recently released her third album, *New Dawn*.



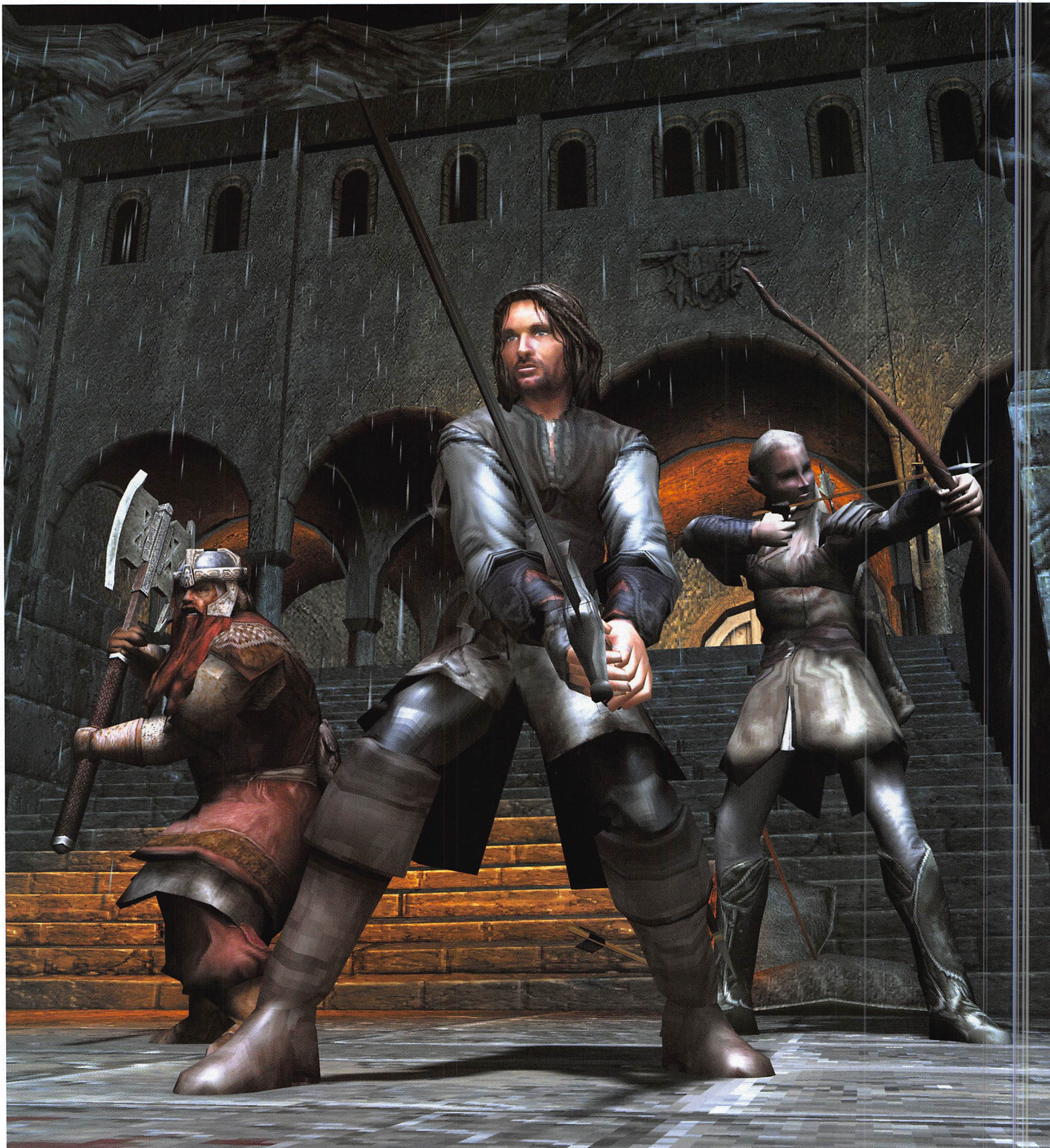
Rygar: The Legendary Adventure

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: tecmo / publisher: tecmo / available: now

My game of the year so far, Rygar is simply put the action event of the PS2's young life. It's as polished and well produced as 3D games get and the soundtrack is the stuff of legends.



EA pulls out all the stops, paying homage to one of the greatest films of all time

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

THE TWO TOWERS

words dave halverson



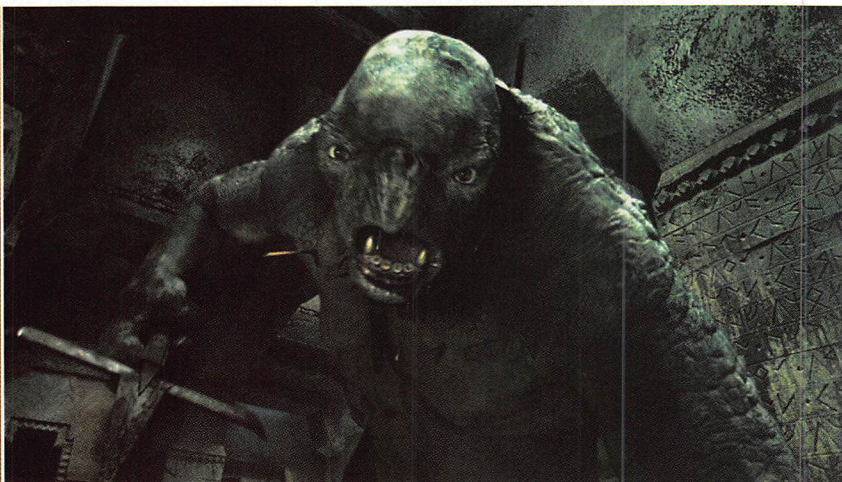
An example of how the film segues to gameplay—simply outstanding.



"The Two Towers sets another benchmark for film-derived gaming."

Aside from Koei's recent offerings, there hasn't been a whole lot to celebrate lately when it comes to pure action gaming, where you just dive in and beat things to a pulp. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* will change that, and at the same time, set a new benchmark (another one?—damn!) for film-derived gaming. *The Thing* was nicely done, *Buffy* was teen perfection, and *Fellowship* is religious to the material, sure, but with *The Two Towers*, the creators actually take you from the film directly into the game, drawing you into the peril like never before. You play initially as one of three heros—Gimli, slow and brutal; Aragorn, faster and master of the sword; or Legolas, fastest and wielder of both blade and arrow—in your fight for the freedom of Middle Earth. As film fades to game, you find yourself immersed in a surprisingly diverse array of situations, although the gameplay itself is as straightforward as it gets: kill or be killed. The action is measured by your ability to attack and defend, familiarizing yourself with the enemies' attack patterns and then skillfully wielding your moves while parrying or dodging the onslaught. This give-and-take exchange is balanced superbly throughout the game and, as I mentioned before, made diverse through clever level design and the choice of characters. A huge *Golden Axe* fan, my money was on Gimli the entire way, even when

he wasn't the best choice; although, beating each level with all three characters will be rewarded and is worth doing given the majesty of the game's visuals. As smitten as I am by *Rygar* these days there is no denying that *The Two Towers* is one of the most beautiful games out there, often times astonishing beyond belief. The models up-close reveal fewer polygons than meet the eye at normal range, allowing the developers to garner realism through textures, lighting, and the surroundings, creating an overall look that is hauntingly true to the material. It's also a blessing of sorts that EA chose this path in relation to Universal's *Fellowship* games, allowing both to thrive as must-have experiences in their own right. The two games have nothing in common, so whether you prefer the thrill of battle or more methodical adventure, your butt is covered. Of course, it is also nice to see a film of this magnitude and thrust paid its virtual respect by the chosen benefactors: I've never experienced so much in the way of trimmings from the source material. Every inch of your progress in *The Two Towers* seems to open more and more added value, from the actors commenting on their vocal roles in the game to the developer's vision and inspiration, to a mass of hidden goodies. Almost makes our interview passé; but hey, you only get to Middle Earth so many times in one lifetime...



"The underlying engine is one of the most feature-rich and powerful pieces of technology shipping on the PS2 this Christmas."

What was your last project?

Before *The Lord of the Rings*, I worked on several projects for EA, including *Medal of Honor* (PSOne), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (PSOne), and *System Shock II* (PC).

What sparked your decision to make *The Two Towers* purely an action experience?

The vision for the first product was to allow gamers to relive the most memorable moments of the first two films. When you think back to *The Fellowship of the Ring* movie, and if you know the story behind the upcoming *The Two Towers* film, you realize that you have a really awesome palette of action scenes to base a game upon.

It must have been nice working with the original cast.

They were incredible. They lent us not only their voices, but also their support in so many other ways.

How on Middle Earth are you displaying so many gorgeous models together with such large, detailed environments and so many effects on PS2?

We're really proud of the technology we have built for the PS2 platform. The underlying engine is certainly one of the most—if not the most—feature-rich and powerful pieces of technology shipping on the PS2 this Christmas. I think players will be blown away by the amount of enemies, NPCs, *Fellowship* members, special effects, advanced lighting effects, environment effects, etc. that we can simultaneously blast onscreen at a very high frame-rate.

The parry system is—rightly so—obviously an integral part of the game, but did you toy with a lock-on or constant block approach for less apt gamers?

The combat and control team experimented with just about every block and parry system imaginable. Ultimately, we realized that a timing-based parry mechanic

was superior because it best supported the "tactical action" combat system we envisioned. The control design really allows player to hit upon a combat rhythm during a massive battle, alternating between offense and defense. The result is that skilled players feel like they are in the "zone"—heroically dispatching enemies with skill and timing.

So many moves, so many characters. Do you recommend one in particular for the first time through? I find Gimli to be the man.

Each character feels very unique, and players will adjust their play style to maximize the abilities of the character. Aragorn is probably the best character to choose for your first time through the game. He offers a good blend between speed and damage in melee combat, plus he has ranged combat abilities.

How large is your team and how long did *The Two Towers* take from start to finish?

The Two Towers was a joint production between EA Studios and Stormfront Studios. At one time we had over 80 people focused on *The Two Towers*. There was, and still is, a large contingent of people working on the upcoming *Lord of the Rings* titles.

Did you begin with storyboards and a thick design doc, or did you go more free-form?

Both, actually. Back in July 2001, we created an early, playable prototype which helped us realize the direction we wanted to go on the product. There is no substitute for experiencing your design ideas through the controller. The design document itself was treated as a record of decisions more than a design medium.

Is this a completely new engine?

About 80% of it was brand new technology. As with most

teams, we started off with the goal of re-using as much existing technology as possible. This quickly gave way to the specific needs of a great game.

What was the most challenging aspect of the development and what are you most proud of?

By far, the most challenging aspect of this project was delivering on the high expectations that would be brought to this game by gamers, fans of the films, and fans of Tolkien's literary works. I am very, very proud of how we were able to deliver a great game and be faithful to the fantasy.

What's your favorite level? They're remarkably diverse.

I have several... but it's hard to talk about them without spoiling the surprise! In the first part of the game, the very first level is one of my favorites. We successfully blended together several important objectives in this first level: hooking the player with a compelling game experience in the first 10 seconds of gameplay, immediately immersing the player in the fantasy of Middle Earth, blurring the line between film and interactive, and teaching key game mechanics.

What do you, as a team, feel is the key to making a game of this type feel truly epic?

As you suggest, it was up to us to deliver in interactive format the same elements that made the films feel so epic. This was a particular challenge, because the PlayStation 2 can't render a "cast of thousands." We therefore had to get very clever with our visual and audio palette to deliver a sense of epic proportion.

So what's next for you?

Vacation! play

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

play rating ●●●●●

PS2


developer: ea / publisher: ea / available: now

Does film-derived action gaming get any more epic than this? No, not even close.



The Two Towers was obviously as artistic an endeavor as it was an interactive one.





A classic is reborn

SHINOBI

words brady fichter

It's been so many years since the incomparable *Shinobi* left his indelible mark on the Genesis and the Sega faithfuls that to compare this inexplicably overdue extension to the original series almost seems trivial. But we gamers do like our classic sequels true to the spirit of their distant predecessors, and here's the upshot: *Shinobi* does not dip into the magic of the Genesis originals, arriving, especially after such a severe absence, as a minor disappointment. Yet for all its nagging flaws, it's most definitely worth your attention—a challenging, instantly addictive action game that delivers with a flair for the old-school.

The game gets off to a rousing start with the introduction of the bad-ass ninja Hotsuma, a beautifully drawn and perfectly controllable character with an incredible appeal. His flowing red scarf has to be one of the coolest, most original designs to come in years. He darts along the walls, double-jumps across the post-

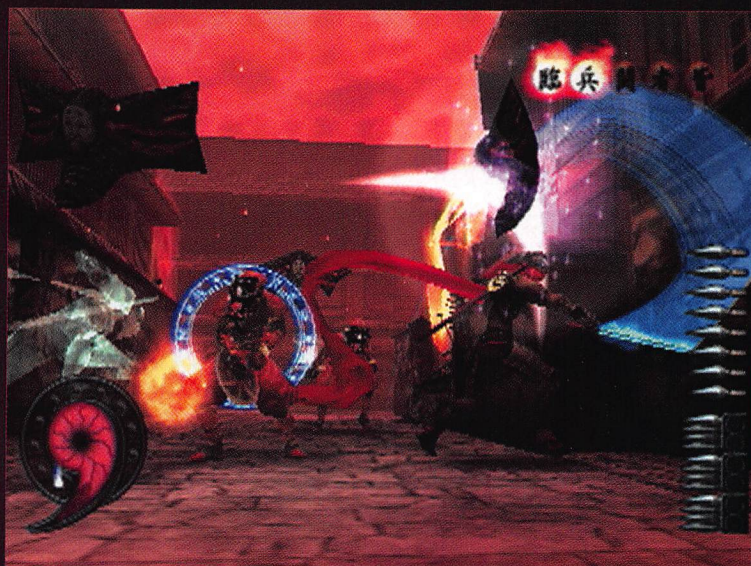
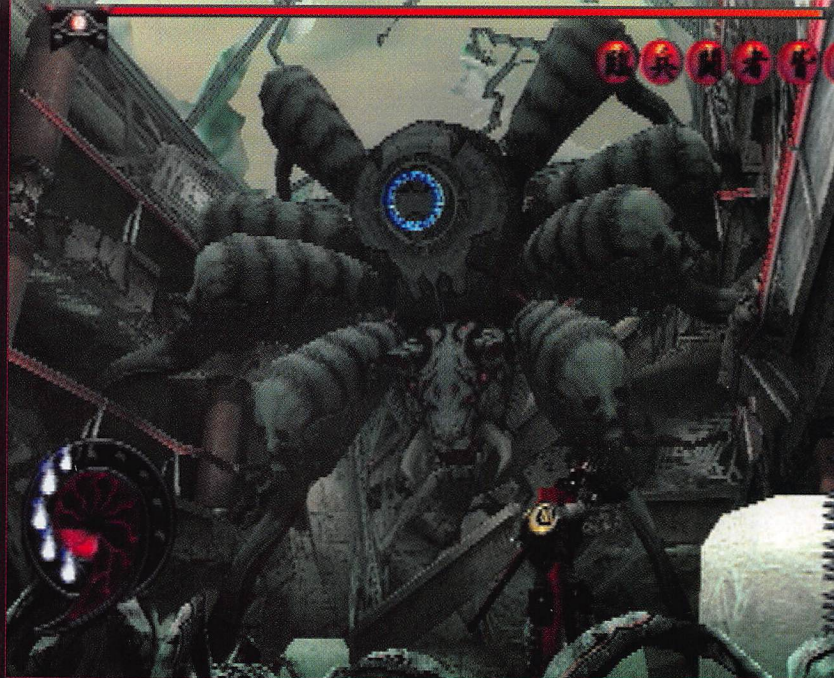
apocalyptic ruins of Japan, tosses shurikens with needle-point precision, and wields a magical sword with deadly speed.

Shinobi aspires to little more than tightly wound, scripted action where enemies constantly fall from the sky and pop from the ground, forcing your hacking skills to be polished to a razor-sharp edge. The action threatens to numb you after extended play, but the engaging combo system, which rewards with the bloody, dramatic end to multiple targets at once, is a consistent lifeline to the more monotonous moments. When you finally do make your way through the winding, maze-like corridors and reach a boss, the difficulty of the battle swings on your ability to dial in the multi-angled attacks.

While *Shinobi* does lack in complexity, both in its presentation and gameplay, everything is handled competently and with a touch of classic sensibilities that actually grows as the game progresses. I liked the

texturing and coloring, the enemy designs and basic gameplay structure, but there's just no looking past the pervading sense of simplicity. It doesn't help, too, that the camera is always fighting to keep up with Hotsuma's unusually nimble movements. That this is *Shinobi* and complaints do arise has to be a disappointment. But play it, and you'll be glad you did. **play**

"...a challenging, instantly addictive action game that delivers with a flair for the old-school."



Hotsuma is just the coolest character to come in a long time.

play rating ●●●●●

It's a challenging, fun game, but *Shinobi* is not what it could, and should, have been.

shinobi

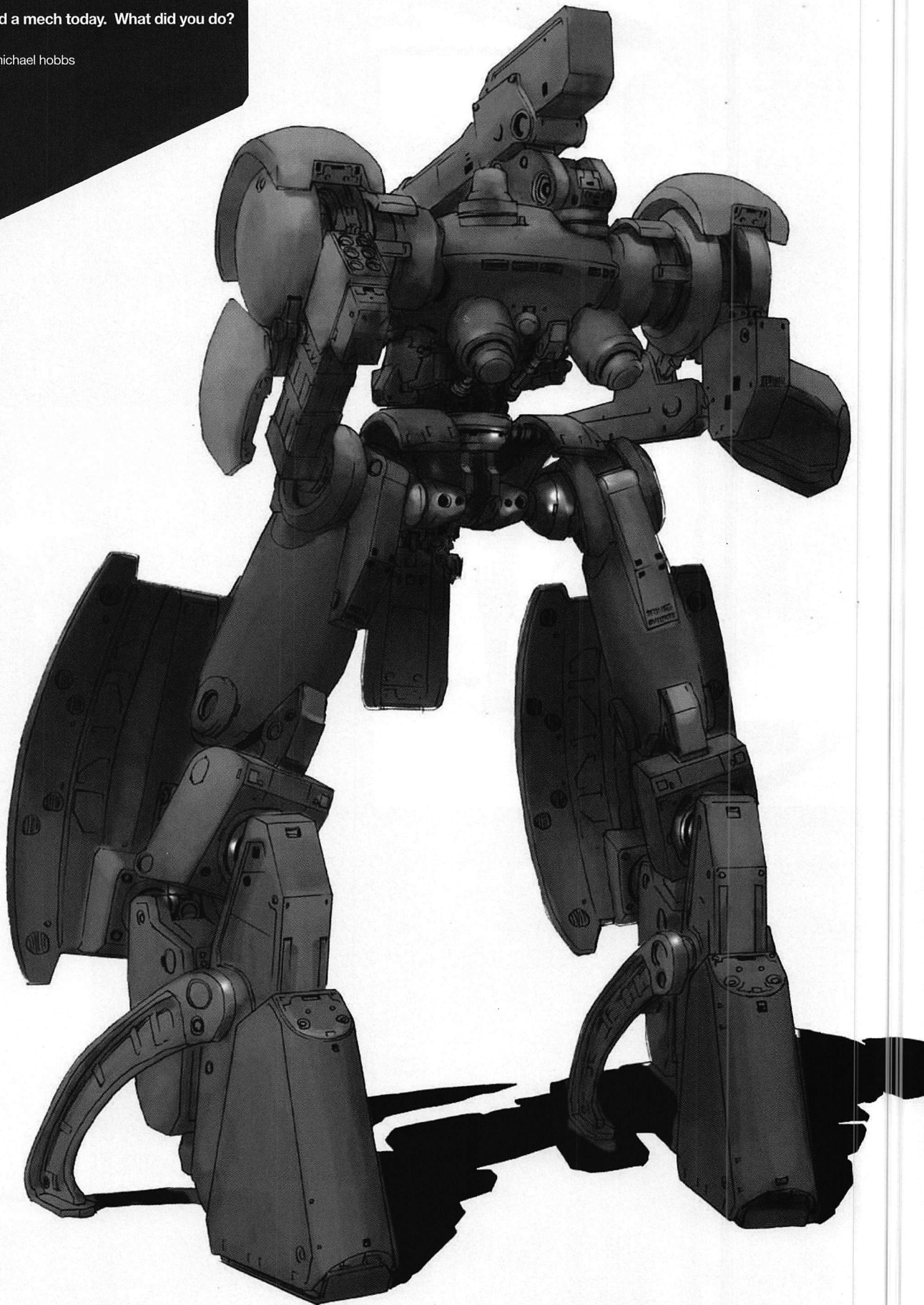
PS2

developer: sega overworks / publisher: sega / available: now

STEEL BATTALION

I piloted a mech today. What did you do?

words michael hobbs



Capcom's got some guts. Behold *Steel Battalion*, a \$150 gaming experience that is sure to leave casual gamers scratching their heads. But fear not, ye of healthy bank balances and mech fetishism, for what we have here is an absolutely stunning effort, a combination of hubris and execution that left me giddy with delight.

So what's it all about? Well, any discord on *Steel Battalion* must begin with the controller, the main culprit in the steep asking price for the game. This 24-button, two-stick monster took up most of my coffee table with the pedals tucked neatly underneath, and I felt a rush of geeky satisfaction as I gripped the control sticks for the first time. This was going to be an experience.

Indeed, I couldn't hold back the laugh when I was first asked to enter the elaborate start-up sequence that precedes each of the game's missions. It goes like this: Press the pulsing Cockpit Hatch button and watch your viewscreen and control read-outs fold down and in all around you while gorgeous little clicks and hisses emanate from the Dolby Digital surround. Watch the OS boot up. Next, press the Ignition switch and revel in the thud of great power. Flick a series of toggle switches and finally, press the Start button once all gauges are in the green, and your mech is now ready to launch. Put it in first gear and depress the heavy metal pedal, and the thing begins to lumber forward. Awesome.

Once under way, you'll find the control layout pleasing and effective. The left stick controls turning, and its little thumb stick controls your looking. The right stick is your aiming device, so you have the ability to move, look, and shoot in-

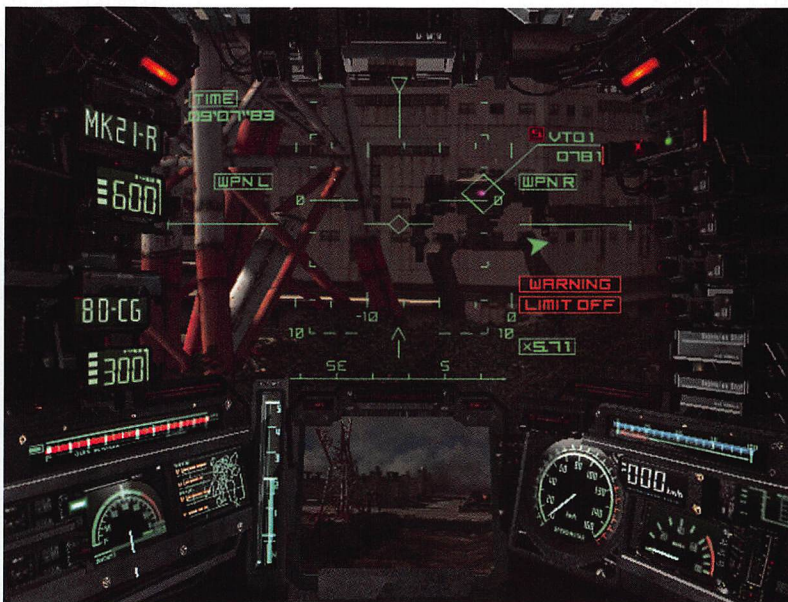
"Playing with the monster dual stick left me with the feeling that I had actually done something."

dependently in any direction. Additional controls allow you to zoom in and out, extinguish on-board fires, launch chaff, communicate with teammates, activate night vision, and switch weapons.

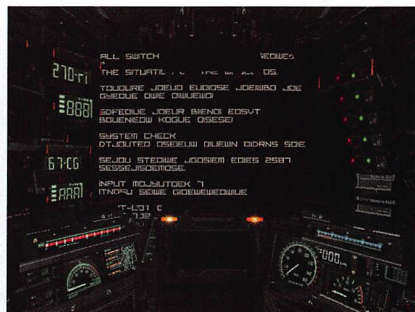
You may be wondering if there is room for a game amongst all this hoopla. There is, and a very satisfying one at that. Like most mission-based affairs, the greatest emphasis is placed on destruction, regardless of the surrounding plot and objectives, but what makes this game special is its over-arching attention to detail and feeling of realism. Something as simple as being zoomed way up and firing off some missiles at a gun turret is rendered insanely great by way of its presentation. There will be a slight delay between seeing the missile hit and hearing the sound, just as there would be in real life. These sorts of tricks are used everywhere, and the cumulative effect is absolutely fantastic.

But things are not perfect. Some occasionally heavy fog mars the otherwise brilliant visual presentation, and there were times when my A.I. teammates would get caught out and basically become useless. And I must admit, if the game were greatly simplified and could be played with a regular pad, it might feel a little slow and dull.

It's a testament to the brilliance of the game's concept and execution that I am completely enamored with it, even as I grapple with the knowledge that it would seem slightly less great without the controller. But I tell you, playing with the monster dual stick left me with the feeling that I had actually been somewhere and done something. I was not just twiddling my thumbs away. I was piloting a mech. **play**



This is but one of the stages of *Steel Battalion*'s awesome mech start-up sequence.



INPUT DEVICE

Steel Battalion's deeply involving play experience begins with the 24-button control unit. Not pictured are the metal drive pedals that you step on to move the mech. Every button on the face of the console has a legitimate function, from the Fire Extinguisher to the Eject button hidden behind a safety cap. And nothing in the world of gaming is as cool as the start-up sequence that you must go through before you launch each mission. Flick those toggle switches!



steel battalion



developer: capcom / publisher: capcom / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

One of the most immersing gaming experiences I've ever had, Capcom's *Steel Battalion* knows no limits in its pursuit of perfect mech simulation.

In case you hadn't noticed, this page, among others in our last issue, suffered from a post-production glitch. We couldn't rerun them all, but *Blinx* is so cool, we just couldn't resist.

Cat in the 'Box

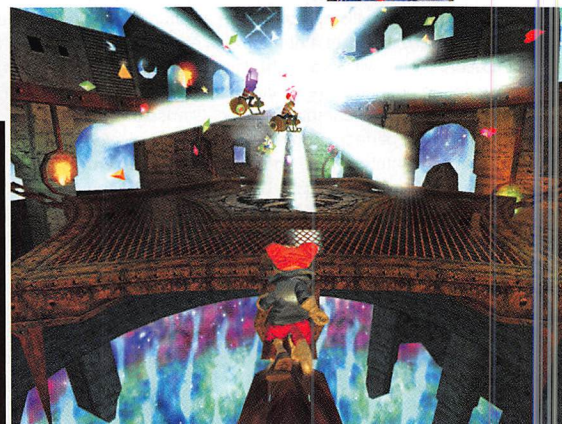
BLINX: THE TIME SWEEPER

words dave halverson

Only Naoto Ohshima, the co-creator of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, could come up with a race of cats that make and deliver time to different worlds, and one cat in particular, Blinx, who'll risk all nine of his lives to save one such world, along with its human princess. Problem: The Tom-Tom Gang, who steal and sell time on the black market, has stolen so much that world "B1Q64" is about to go nuclear. Solution: A cat with a vacuum cleaner. Glitches in time become crystals and, eventually, crystals become monsters, and for now, that is all you need to know. There are two types of people in this world: those who will take that information and act on it and those who... Hey! Don't turn the page!

Such is the joy of videogames that such a universe can exist outside the mind and be brought to life for us all to explore. And so muscle-bound is the Hummer of home consoles—the Xbox—that it's become the ultimate conduit for creators like Ohshima to bring their visions to light. *Blinx* is of that rare breed of game that exists, for the most part, as the result of one man's vision, like *Sonic* was to Naoto and Naka, or *Mario* and *Link* to Miyamoto. It's a boarding pass to a strange place, where you'll do things you've never dreamt among characters you've never imagined, much less spurted trash at. Sucking up anything not affixed to the environments, via the Time Sweeper, and then blowing it back out at said monsters until the area is clear, is the basis of the action in *Blinx*, although it's much easier said than done. In order to achieve this simple goal, you'll need to learn how and when to manipulate time via "pause," "rewind," "fast forward," "record," and "playback." Each area in *Blinx* is constructed, populated, and rigged with events designed to make time manipulation an entertaining and addicting new gaming experience, shrouded in gorgeous visuals and music that (sorry for this) warms your heart; and it works so well that *Blinx* borders on impossible to put down. If this game doesn't make you smile, then you probably don't have a mouth.

Little is left to be said after last month's cover story except to say that the overall package, especially in terms of replay value, exceeds my expectations, putting *Blinx* among my top five games of the year. It's purr-fect... Sorry for that, too. **play**



What could be more entertaining than a cat with a vacuum?



"If this game doesn't make you smile then you probably don't have a mouth."

blinx: the time sweeper

XB

developer: artoon / publisher: microsoft / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

An absolute gem of a platformer, inventive, addicting, and infinitely replayable—Ohshima hasn't lost a step.



The Protectors
of all that is good....

are ready to open
a can of whup-ass
on all that is evil.

You've been summoned by the White Wizards into a deadly game of kill or be killed. The bravest of the brave, you must protect the three 'Towers of Elements' from an army of Orks, Lizard Men and demons sent by the Lord of the Underworld. And that's just before lunch. You'll need to sharpen your sword on Mad Ravens, Goblins, Zombies and other hideous creatures before you get to take a whack at the Dark Lord himself. But, fear not, because the more scumbags you annihilate, the more tricks you'll stuff up your sleeve and the more magical Black Stones you collect, the more deadly you become... It all makes for an interesting journey through the mythical land of Zedan.

© SIMULTANEOUS MULTI-PLAYER (1-4) REAL TIME ACTION THROWS YOU INTO 26 PERILOUS LEVELS OF NON-STOP SWORD PLAY AND BLOOD-LETTING.

© COLLECT WEAPONS, SPELLS AND MAGICAL STONES AS YOU DO AWAY WITH A DARK ARMY WHO WANTS TO ENSLAVE YOUR WORLD.

© WARRIOR OR WARLOCK, ARCHER OR THIEF. CHOOSE YOUR CHARACTER, RAISE YOUR WEAPON AND BEGIN YOUR QUEST TO BATTLE THE DARK LORD AND SAVE THE WORLD OF ZEDAN.

Black Stone

MAGIC & STEEL



Blood
Violence



Where games meet reality.

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Where the evil began...

RESIDENT EVIL ZERO

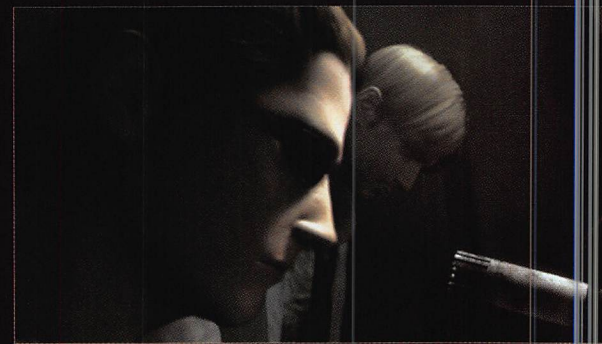
words brady fiechter

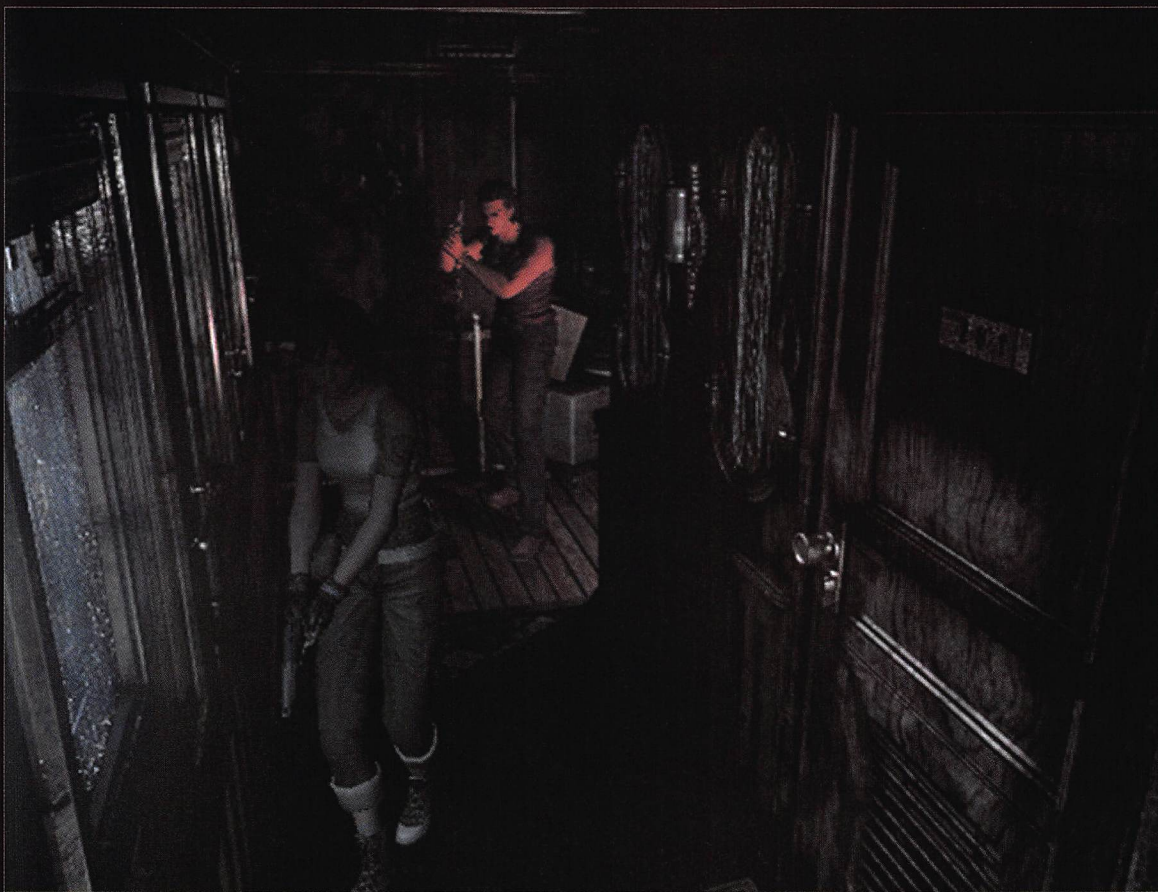
There is a magnetic key locked in a leather-bound briefcase. You desperately need to pass through that locked door that obviously needs that key. But to access the key, you need another key. But this is not your typical briefcase with a basic locking mechanism. It requires two shiny medallions be placed in two parallel slots, but of course the medallions are in separate compartments on the train, so you have to search for them first, examine them, place them in the slot, and the key is yours. Crap. There is another door that is locked, and this time the lock is damaged, so you have to find another way through while dealing with these disgusting, diseased corpses that pine for your flesh.

Why are so many doors locked in resident evil games? Since everyone has been mutilated, did they lock up in an effort to save their lives? And why do they like to put slots in everything for the unlocking?

You exclaim: "Damn right, what's the deal? I hate these Resident Evil games, because they are all the same, and you can't hold that much in your inventory, and the control never changes, and the puzzles are so arbitrary and abstract. The story is silly, the voice acting pathetic, the pacing really slow. And I'm tired of running around finding keys to unlock stuff in protracted ways!"

All this complaining would be valid, and all this exists in Resident Evil 0, the latest and maybe even greatest in the interminable zombie apocalypse simulator. I love these games. For all who share my addiction to Resident Evil, prepare for another exhilarating, nightmarish journey through Raccoon city, where everything burns, leaks, crumbles, and rusts. It's always dark and raining. Death spills into the rooms and streets. No Resident Evil has established such gloomy mood as effectively as Resident Evil Zero, which paints every screen with a decadent artistry that is unmatched in its extraordinary detail and inspired darkness. Like





Games do not look any better than this. In motion, the lighting and shadows stun.



"No *Resident Evil* has established such gloomy mood..."



the *Resident Evil* remake of early this year, this prequel to the original master of horror exists almost as an interactive gallery of gothic paintings. But what sets this game apart is a tone that is creepier and even more lavishly fed, with a creepier, more modernly stylized approach to the drawing of its images. Lurking in this awesome world of death are gorgeously modeled, freakishly animated creatures that are pulse-poundingly hideous, often introduced through marvelous CG sequences. Confronting them is no different than before, but the way they move, converging in more claustrophobic areas, challenges and engages in new ways. If this series must be criticized for recycling durable ideas, *RE Zero* is at least a step in the right direction, adding a few very cool changes in the general structure. Team work has replaced the single-character progression, forcing you to switch back and forth between the anxious, fledgling cop Rebecca and escaped convict Billy, working in tandem, in separate rooms or together. The dynamic works very well; praise is due for the clever level design that doesn't muck up the pacing and make the presence of an additional character seem extraneous. Once again, capcom has made a game that towers over ordinary efforts.

resident evil zero

GC

developer: capcom / publisher: capcom / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

It's the latest in the *Resident Evil* series, and it's just too good.



Weird science has a name

DR. MUTO

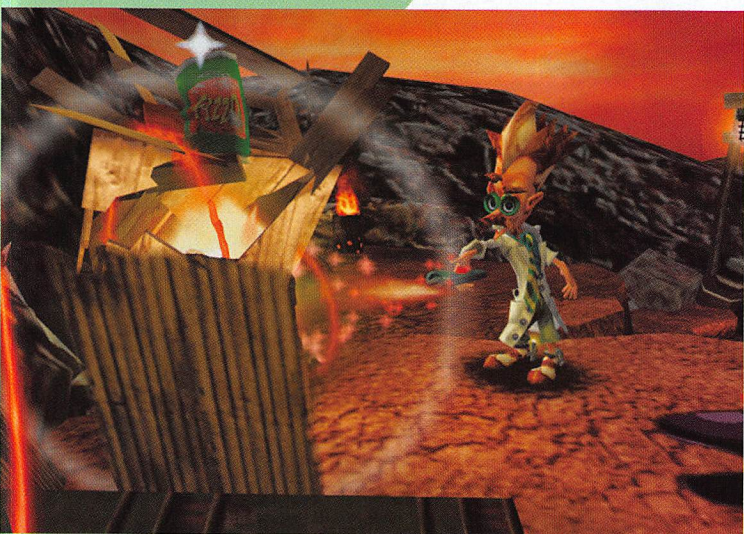
words dave halverson

Over the past decade or so, my interest in Midway's console offerings has steadily waned as *Jam* after *Jam*, *Thunder* after *Thunder*, *Blitz* after *Blitz*, *Rush* after *Rush*, and *Gauntlet* after *Gauntlet* have sapped my will to swim in the Arcadian waters. The one game I was optimistic for, *Deuce*, a quirky medieval platformer starring animated playing cards, fell by the wayside, and *Legion: The Legend of Excalibur*, the first offering from in-house sensation 7 Studios, turned out be Ex-cruciating... and I may never forgive them for *Mortal Kombat: Sub Zero*. But Midway seems to be changing their stripes, as if prompted by a secret meeting with my subconscious: The mighty arcade monolith is currently poised to spark their own console revolution, with a line-up of original platformers, shooters, adventures, and even a fresh coat of blood for *Mortal Kombat* that (if *Dr. Muto* is any indication) may spark the beginning of a run on the console as eventful as their string of hits in the arcades—must be the shoes.

Dr. Muto is the kind of action-adventure you'd expect from AAA town—Rare, Ubi Soft

France, etc.—a shape-shifting smorgasbord with day-long hubs that alone offer more gameplay than many entire games. Muto's plight begins when the president of Planet Midway decides to use one of his inventions to solve a planet-wide power crisis, only when he flips the switch, instead of light, he gets a one-way ticket to boomtown. Muto's mission is to reassemble the exploded world by searching high and low over the four remaining planets in the system to find the pieces necessary to assemble the Genitor 9000 (the only machine capable of regenerating the planet) along with enough bio-matter, called Terra, to fuel it.

Since the terrain varies over the four worlds, Muto must shift his DNA to gel with each environment, morphing into twisted versions of a gorilla, fish, mouse, squirrel, and bird; and therein resides the game's hook, which is brought-off incredibly well. Shape-shifting can be the kiss of death, but in *Muto* it is executed and implemented masterfully on the fly—no muss, no fuss—with every form taking you through a diversity of play mechanics



"Puzzle-solving, platforming, and exploration are weaved together seamlessly..."

The good doctor deals death to degenerate DNA with his handy remote, all without a couch!

within the tiered levels. The playfields in *Muto* stretch both horizontally and vertically (similar to, but more detailed than, *Mario Sunshine*'s) among areas that look as if they were built with a monkey wrench rather than software tools. The level design in *Muto* is some of the most creative and downright wacky in recent memory, harkening back to games like (the original) *Banjo Kazooie*. Puzzle-solving, platforming, and exploration are weaved together seamlessly, and the game looks as good as it plays, with extraordinary detail brought to drudgingly effective life through color schemes that match the game's clutter and chaos perfectly.

Muto himself is an okay dude, too—for a mad scientist—with the familiar double jump, boost and hover lurking under his lab coat. The good doctor deals with the enemy—a flawlessly designed array of junkyard freaks and bots inspired by a mixture of the technological and toxic—via a unique two-prong attack where he stuns and holds them (often hurling them into walls) before obliterating them with a blast from his handy remote. He is also in constant contact with AI, his super computer (a parody of Hal from *2001*, complete with a patronizing wit and dry sense of humor).

Fitted with every staple from the platformer parts depot—nasty, pattern-based bosses, all manner of timing traps and obstacles, and clever puzzles that exist around every turn—if there's a fly in the ointment, I certainly didn't see it. *Muto* is Midway's best game since... shizzizzle, this may be their best game yet! **play**

Dr. Muto

PS2

developer: midway / publisher: midway / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

Muto puts weird science on the map with a toxic adventure worthy of many a sequel.

Let no man put asunder heavy metal thunder
MECHASSAULT

words dave halverson

There are some things as 20th-century humanoids that, no matter how much we desire, we will never do. Unless they find MJ's recipe to reverse the aging process, or better yet, a way to bring us back after a long deep freeze, none of us is ever going to pilot a mobile suit or mech. Anyone who follows *Gundam*, *MechWarrior* or *BattleTech* (on which this game is based) has likely imagined synchronizing with 100 tons or so of case-hardened mobile steel and laying the smack-down on a city or two, but for now, it's an experience that can only be had tethered to a visual display. That experience is about to get a whole lot cooler. I was hyped about *MechAssault* long before I knew about its Xbox Live component, which for the limited time I spent online, was a kick-ass affair. Offline, however, just watching lumbering mechs pick apart realistic cities was enough for me, and in the 20 single-player campaigns, you'll do that and a whole lot more as you join forces with the Wolf Dragoon mercenaries to take down the Word of Blake, and we're not talkin' *Baretta* here.

For a game like this to work, certain crucial elements must converge. The mechs must look and feel weighty and somehow convey that to the playfield; the environments need to react as if they are being assaulted by an unholy war machine; and the missions must be balanced properly—not overly meticulous, not to open-ended. Give me enough time to enjoy

myself but not so much as to take me out of the moment. The first mech game for the Xbox, *Gunmetal*, missed on all counts; *MechAssault* delivers on each, and on top of that, looks absolutely stunning doing it. The secret is in the little touches you experience throughout the campaign like tracks left behind when you stomp from grass to pavement; leaves flying off of branches as you cut through trees; the ability to use shock waves from explosions and the environment as offensive weapons; setting flammable objects ablaze with gunfire; and much more. Much time was also spent making *MechAssault* feel right, and it has paid off in droves in the final product. All totaled, 10 mechs become yours, each with specific strengths and weaknesses (stealth is an especially wicked accoutrement) all rigged with jump jets, three weapon types, and most importantly, your name on the cockpit. Mission control comes via some hot babe-a-licious, and unbelievably, it's not sappy and gay—even more reason to lock and load.

Aside from *Armored Core* and *Gun Griffon*, which are strictly mediocre fare these days, quality, story-driven mech campaigns are few and far between (*Steel Battalion* is a sim—make no mistake about it). So when the dust settles—and there will be lots of it—*MechAssault* will stand as the new heavy-metal champion of the mech assault ranks. **play**

"MechAssault delivers and looks absolutely brilliant doing it."

interview **denny thorley, producer, day 1 studios**

What do you feel are the most important ingredients in creating the perfect mech experience?

Mech combat is all about power—unbelievable, devastatingly lethal power. We make an all-out effort in *MechAssault* to reinforce the massive amounts of firepower these war machines bring to the party. When your fully charged Particle Projection Cannon blows a 25-foot-wide hole in a building, and glass and concrete shatter as the building gets ripped apart—that's power. When you are running down a busy city street and your mech kicks an automobile or truck and sends it flying—that's power. The second most important thing is control. Give the player immediate control of all the power, and design the interface to become a matter of instinct as quickly as possible. This allows the player to focus on tactics rather than trying to wrestle a complex control scheme.

"When your Particle Cannon blows a 25-foot-wide hole in a building, and glass and concrete shatter—that's power."

Was MA planned as an on-and-offline game from the outset?

MechAssault was an Xbox-only game from the beginning, but not an online game. We originally thought we were going to have to wait for the sequel for awesome online play. Due to changes in our development specifications, our ship schedule was extended. The new ship date put us very close to the launch of Xbox Live and we weren't willing to disappoint all the mech fans. The truth is, we wanted to play the game online ourselves. We are thrilled to have the opportunity to be "in" on the launch of Live. Live rocks!

You don't employ bump-mapping—in fact, few Xbox games these days do. Why?

Great question. We tried bump-mapping but didn't get any significant value from our game's camera perspective. If the camera was frequently closer to the ground or buildings, we might have seen more benefits to bump-mapping.

The CG movie that opens the campaign is awesome. Why don't we see more between levels?

Thank you. The story for the game took several revisions and when it was all said and done we needed to balance cinema vs. additional gameplay assets. We elected to focus on gameplay and multiplayer online.

I promise you will see more cinema in our next title.

You have captured the essence of mass perfectly in this game, giving the player a sensation of really commanding a massive war machine. This must be difficult to do, as few mech games pull it off. What's the secret?

Few "giant robot" games spend time making you feel like you are really in control of these behemoths. But *MechAssault* is part of the BattleTech universe and we've had 15 years to think about what it takes to make mechs feel like mechs and not just giant robots. In *MechAssault*, there are consequences for "bumping" in to a building with your 100 ton mech. The building gets damaged! You punch a massive hole! When you are moving slowly and kick a car, it goes a modest distance; but if your mech is at full speed, the car will go a city block. All of these subtle

details reinforce the mass, and size, and ultimately the power of the 'Mechs.

The way your buildings go down... amazing! They seem to have guts. Do they? How "thick" are they?

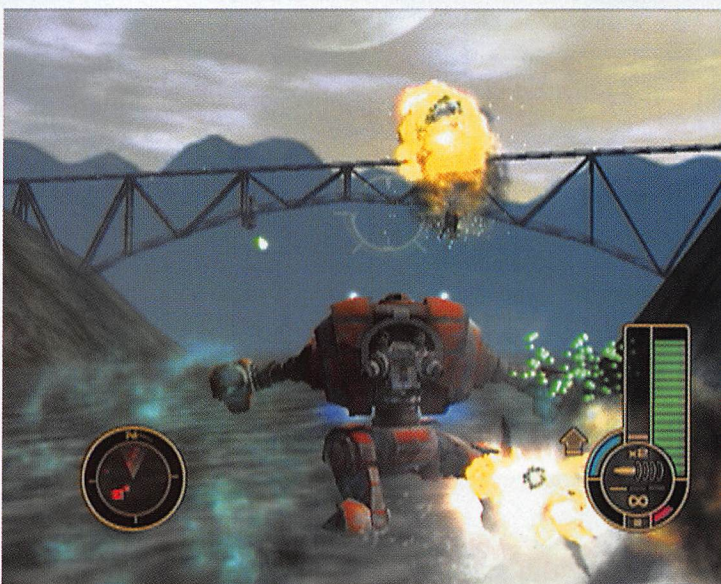
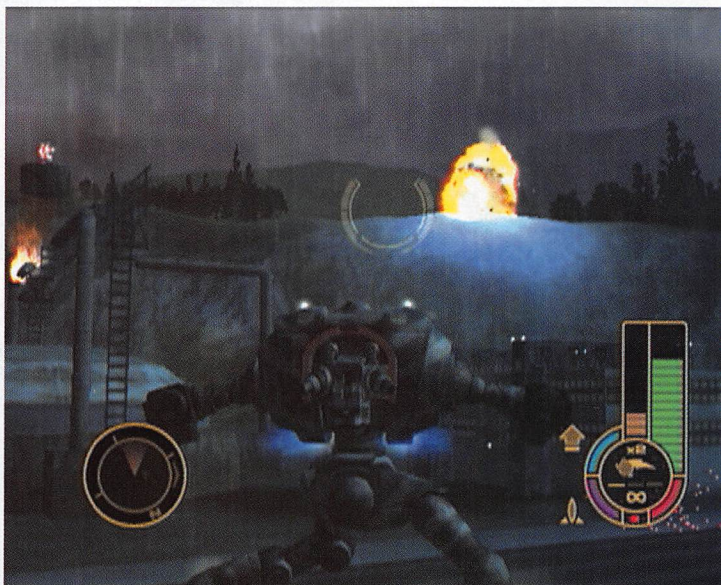
If you only knew... The truth is, they do have guts. The first model you see in the game gets holes blown into it and the player sees a second image behind the hole to reinforce the realism. When the player has done enough damage, the holes get transferred to a "collapse state" building and the hand-tweaked, animated collapse takes over. It was time consuming and expensive, but worth the effort.

Now tell me you're working on the sequel and not wasting too much time on online... I want a massive campaign with more CG, (that CO is a hottie). How long will I have to wait?

Our artists will be thrilled to hear your comments on Natalia. Thanks. We don't comment on future projects, but I will reiterate my promise for more cinema and I'm here to assure you that our next project will not disappoint. Stay tuned.

It's amazing! Thanks!

All of your terrific feedback just motivates us more! Thanks... see ya online. **play**



Think that bridge has a problem? It does. It go boom and fall down.

MechAssault

XB

developer: **day 1 studios** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **now**

play rating ●●●●●

MechAssault should come with a "satisfaction guaranteed" label. The game is just pure hard core action and fun, on and off line.



The king of the skatepark returns

TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 4

words torn ham

Avid action sports gamers already know *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* is the best skateboarding title out there. With its incredible graphics, near flawless gameplay and tight controls, the franchise has succeeded where similar games have failed. So the question remains, how do you top it? Enter *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*. Just when you didn't think the series could get any better, Neversoft pulls another rabbit out of their hat.

The biggest change here is the brand-new Career mode. Unlike previous games where the Career mode is very regimented and timed, for *Pro Skater 4*, players are given the flexibility to choose the goals they want to complete. So when you enter a level, you have an infinite amount of time to spend there; whether you want to practice or explore, it's all up to you. Goals are given to you via NPC characters that are placed throughout the level. The challenges will be familiar to players of previous *Tony Hawk* games (spelling S-K-A-T-E or beating a high score). And just as before, the more goals you complete, the more points you acquire, which you can later use to upgrade your skater's abilities, attain new tricks, and buy new gear.

Neversoft has also improved the online experience (for PS2 and Xbox only). New for *THPS4* is the Goal Attack. Here, players compete against others online to complete various goals in a level. Playing on your own is fun, but the true chaos is when a bunch of your buds are frantically trying to do the same exact thing you are. Another key multiplayer addition is Capture the Flag (can you say, "Kick ass"?). Players can even create their own CTF levels with the Park Editor and then post them online.

As with every new *Tony Hawk* game, the trick mechanics have been refined as well. In addition to sketching behind cars and freestyle tricks, players will be able to execute a spine transfer, which lets you perform transition combos easier. Some of the more difficult tricks from *THPS3*—such as the multiple grind, lip tricks, and manuals—are now much easier to execute.

Granted, the visuals in *Tony Hawk 3* were great; if you can believe it, this year's update looks better than ever. Not only have the player animations been improved, but the colors are richer and deeper. The environments, too, are extremely complex and show off some pretty nice textures. *THPS4* also has new bail and wipeout animations (some of which will truly make you cringe).

And just like all previous *Tony Hawk* games, the soundtrack will rock your system with over 35 licensed songs. Where else can you skate to Iron Maiden, AC/DC, De La Soul, Public Enemy and the Sex Pistols? *Evolution Skateboarding?* Yeah, right! **play**



With a new Career mode, new tricks, and graphics that look like this, you'll be staying home for a long while.

"Some of the more difficult tricks from *THPS3*—such as the multiple grind, lip tricks, and manuals—are now much easier to execute."

tony hawk's pro skater 4

GC PS2 XB

developer: neversoft / publisher: activision / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

As expected, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4* lives up to its legendary reputation.

SUIKODEN III

words brady fiechter

I've just played the most majestic, heartfelt, delicately crafted role-playing game since *Chrono Cross*. But Square didn't make it, it's not *Final Fantasy*, it doesn't vibrate with lavish production values, there is no scintillating wow-factor to make you disregard bad voice acting and limp storytelling. It's the quietly powerful *Suikoden III*, the third chapter in the wonderfully engrossing series that contains everything I love about a grand RPG. Gradually, intriguingly built around the actions of three heros, the story switches its point of view at significant turning points in the plot. Its themes are familiar but powerful, striking with undercurrents of rare poignancy, and the inventive, interlocking character arcs inject further drama into the plight.

From the battles to the towns to the castles and dungeons,

Suikoden captivates with a style that flows with passion and warmth. There is a simplicity to everything, and the characters are a wooden presence with their cold animations, but the game does not suffer from its technological limitations.

Continuing with the series' unique recruiting system, *Suikoden III* draws you in even more as you begin to build a fortress, making friends with the scores of the world's inhabitants and convincing them to join your cause. Only your main crew of six takes part in the ultimate struggle for redemption and freedom, battling in an even more streamlined combat system, which culminates in strategic mass-army skirmishes. This may not be the most acclaimed RPG series, but *Suikoden III* shows why it should be the most cherished.

"...majestic, heartfelt and delicately crafted..."



Horses can be ridden into battle, adding yet another entertaining dimension to the game.

suikoden III

PS2 GC XB PC

developer: konami
publisher: konami
available: now

This series continues to show why so many fans swear by its emotional pull.

play rating ●●●●●

DRAGON'S LAIR 3D

words dave halverson

It was a great idea taking Dirk and company into the polygonal realm, inflating the cartoon motif into full-fledged 3D, and it's been executed with great care, staying true to the arcade games roots, injecting action and adventure into the reflex-action and puzzle-solving formula. It's also a milestone of sorts, hard evidence that consoles can bring 2D cel animation to life without a loss in quality; graphics that less than a decade ago we never dreamed of manipulating.

But there seems to be something missing, it's not much—a step here, a collision mishap there—but somehow, on the whole, the game seems a tad sparse. It's a worthy action/adventure no doubt, but the category is busting at the seams with formidable competition. *Dragon Lair 3D*'s hopes lie in whether or not the

next generation will care about plucking the busty Daphne from the claws of Singe the Dragon—it has after all, been 20 years since the game's arcade debut. The action remains somewhat straightforward—see a keyhole, you need a key—and since movement and abilities are limited, it doesn't take a whole lot of deductive reasoning to figure things out; a locked door and two bells, hmmm, when I hit the first a timer starts... Requisite dodging, swinging, climbing... it's all in here and executed well. Where the game lacks is in the repetitive nature of the battles and enemy types, but the beautiful locales, spectacular animation, diverse gameplay, and 1080° high-def TV option, more than bring up the rear.

Good luck, Dirk. I'm a believer.

"Dodging, swinging, climbing... it's all in here and executed well."



Sometimes it's better to run, as Dirk often does... but always gallantly!

dragons lair 3d

XB

developer: dragonstone software
publisher: ubi soft
available: now

Like the arcade original, *Dragons Lair 3D* is sequel worthy. Lets hope it doesn't take another 20 years.

play rating ●●●●●

Shits 'n' giggles with magic's new poster boy

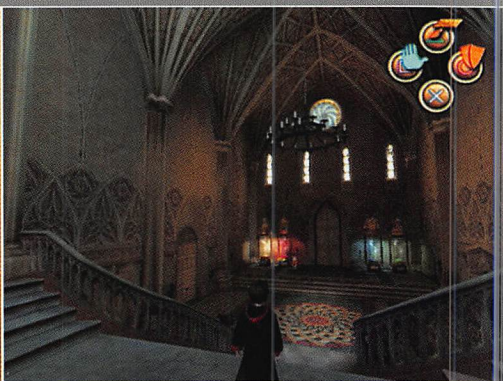
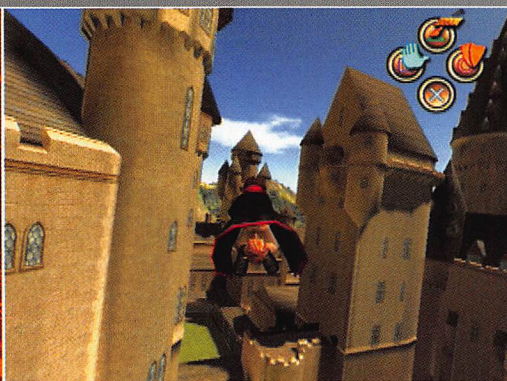
HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

words dave halverson

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter is to current pop-culture what C.S. Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia" and J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" were generations ago, with one big exception—Potter seems more groomed for pre-teens, and less likely to leave an indelible mark on its audience deep enough to survive to adulthood. There's plenty of adventure afoot for sure, but with all the prim and properness (with things like Bertie Botts Beans and Wiggieneld), it's more like *Mary Poppins* than, say, *Wizards*, another childhood favorite of mine. There's no real sense of danger in the Potter tomes or the feeling that someone may actually expire. The evil head grunt of Slytherin (the rival house to Harry's Gryffindor) is a blonde-haired brat (with a propensity for hair gel) that Eddie Munster would have had Grandpa turn into a bed pan and never look back, save to fill it. Of course, I haven't seen *The Chamber of Secrets* yet, but based on the game, I reckon it's quite tame. Then again, its purpose being to convert young minds to the dark arts, perhaps I'm being too judgmental. If only we had a Flourish and Blotts, I'd be channeling this review to you right now.

The game based on the film, by the wizards at EA—who seem to be raising the bar on cross-over entertainment (as evidenced by *Buffy* and *Lord of the Rings*)—is absolutely, without a doubt, one of the most gorgeous and painstakingly detailed efforts you will ever see. However, it comes with a price: the most obtrusive loading you may ever encounter, which is unfortunate. I mean, this game loads to load. You may wait 20-30 seconds to load less than a minute of run time to the next room and then sit through 30 seconds more. Then that room is likely linked to several more loading screens. The game's flow is severely fractured by it all, which is doubly troubling given its amazing sense of wonder and awe.

The gameplay, light on reflex action, heavy on spell casting and errands—which is fine for Potter peeps—is mostly by the numbers (everything is explained and then marked in a journal), but it's skillfully produced and curiously addicting. There are puzzles, although most take little brain-power to sort out, and the action is tame but fun, casting Flipendo on nasty sods and performing incantations to sever, paralyze, and fend off spooks, books, and what have you from the bowels of Hogwarts. The game even keeps score between the houses, adding a sense of responsibility to the proceedings. You're not just playing for yourself but the team as well, and don't forget Harry's little buttercup in waiting, Hermione. The game's best bits come by way of stealth (there's lots of it, as Harry's always sneaking about) and tossing gnomes and other nasties, especially when you get to spin and shot-put them over a hedge or something. Quidditch is fun, too, and beautifully executed; in fact, once you get the Nimbus 3000 and the gorgeous outer regions become yours to explore, the game really takes off. With a little luck, or witchcraft, whichever you prefer, perhaps the GameCube and Xbox games won't load as much, making this another crossover title to celebrate. The loading knocks the PS2 version of *Chamber of Secrets*' score down a notch. **play**



harry potter and the chamber of secrets

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: ea / publisher: ea / available: now

If not for the loading, *HP* is a near perfect film adaptation. Look for the 'Cube and Xbox reviews next month and keep your fingers crossed

SHE PRESSED AGAINST HIM
HE COULD NOT RESIST HER NEEDS
HE WOULD DIE FOR HER



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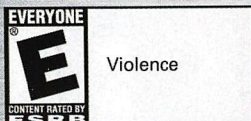
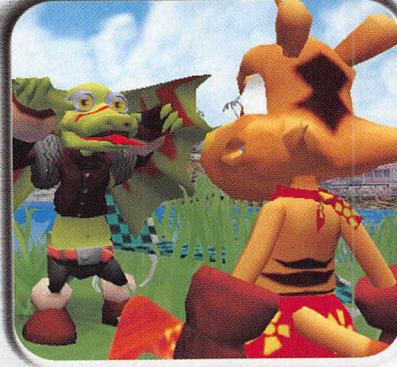
ESRB
RATED BY
RB
Blood and Gore
Strong Language
Violence

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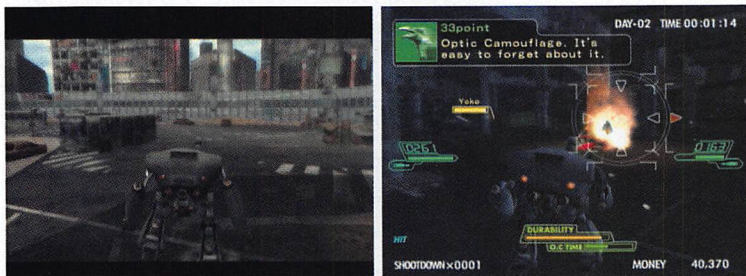
Challenge Everything™

Phantom Crash

play rating ●●●●●

XB

developer: genki / publisher: phantagram / available: now



Phantom Crash is the deepest, most well-rounded mech fighter I've plugged into yet. Genki's quest-based mech battle is enveloped in a cyber-punk circuit that smashes its way through a dilapidated Japan with an eye on realism. Rigged for maximum immersion, *Crash* breaks the typical vs. fighting mold, adding deep role-playing elements, full garage privileges, rival teams with different style rigs—the works. It's beautiful to look at, too, utilizing the same type of distance rendering found in *Wreckless* (on Xbox), along with three classes of mechs, each vastly different in manufacture. Some of the control, especially early on, has issues, and the lack of a solid lock-on smarts a bit, but there's so much depth here, it's only a matter of time before you find a suitable posse of vessels. House pets as operatives I may never get used to, but quirky control I can deal with; the game overall is a cyber-punk mech battler's dream come true. That's you, right?

Dave Halverson

Mario Party 4

play rating ●●●●●

GC

developer: hudson / publisher: nintendo / available: now



A new *Mario Party* game is always cause for happiness; you just know that you and your friends are about to have a great time. In this predictably great sequel, the first in the series to appear on GameCube, Nintendo and Hudson have delivered. There are over 50 all-new mini-games to sink your teeth into, with all the manic button mashing and controller skills that have come to symbolize the series. The graphics are superb, with wonderful water effects and more subtle touches like the

occasional self-shadowing that really bring this interactive board game to life. Though the mini-games are all new, things haven't changed that much from previous entries, save for the new Mushroom dynamic, which lets players grow and shrink almost at will, stomping on other players stealing their coins or squirming through narrow pipes to find your way more quickly to that all-important star.

Michael Hobbs

LOTR: Fellowship of the Ring

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: surreal / publisher: universal interactive / available: now



Fellowship on the PS2, while not quite as task-based as its Xbox brethren, is for the most part the same game; call it *Fellowship: Light*. So if you like less talk and more head-bashing, this may be your version of choice. The emphasis, leaning more towards straightforward action and less tedium, may be best for some, but given the source material, I honestly welcomed the more involved adventure on Xbox. I found myself compelled to fill every entry in the journal, sinking deep into the game's fantastical tone. Also, while this game is dreamy by PS2

standards, it doesn't hold a candle to the Xbox version in terms of visual appeal. But enough comparison: If the PS2 is your sole console, *Fellowship* is a wonderful adventure that no friend of Frodo should be without. Every bit, whether with Frodo, Aragorn or Gandalf, is a formidable game in its own right, and as religious to the literary works as a game can possibly be. There are also those bits of game—a morsel here, a forest there—where I feel Surreal captured the essence of the story a little bit better. A talented bunch of fellows they are.

Dave Halverson

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

play rating ●●●●●

XB

developer: black isle studios / publisher: interplay / available: now



Although Alyth's gate is the one I really want to get into, *Baldur's* will do nicely, thank you—especially since it's looking better than ever on Xbox. Subtle touches like added rain and higher resolution go a long way, especially when a game is this beautiful to begin with it. Superb models, voice acting, and overhead environments that are second to none compliment perfectly balanced top-down action with arguably the best attention to detail ever seen in the category. The emphasis is definitely on action, although item management and tactics play an important role in surviving the onslaught. Three well-rounded characters are offered for doing so: The Elven Sorceress, whose naked frame still brings the wood; the Dwarven Fighter, a pint-sized yet powerful grunt capable of carrying heavy loads; and the Human Archer, a boring, fattish human you needn't bother with. Humans, really, how crude can you get?

Dave Halverson

TimeSplitters 2

XB

play rating ●●●●●

developer: free radical / publisher: eidos / available: now



Honestly, I don't see what the big deal is. No, scratch that, I kind of do, but stacked against competition like *Turok: Evolution* (hey, maybe it's too hard for the girly-man press, but that doesn't mean you should miss it), *Metroid Prime*, *Serious Sam*, and *Nightfire*, *TimeSplitters 2* kind of pales. Don't get me wrong, it's a great game—albeit populated with some of the most simplistic environments ever—packed with lovely character design (the game's main draw, for sure) and spectacularly buttoned-up scenarios, but it seems disjointed and without purpose. Free Radical doesn't really play up the time travel quotient enough to draw you into the peril—if indeed there is any. Rather, the game plays like a collection of shorts. And while they're good, mostly, there's a real lack of character and story development as a result. They should just pick one of their many hot babes and build a game around her—now that I'd stay up late for. *TS2*, for me, is too mixed a bag.

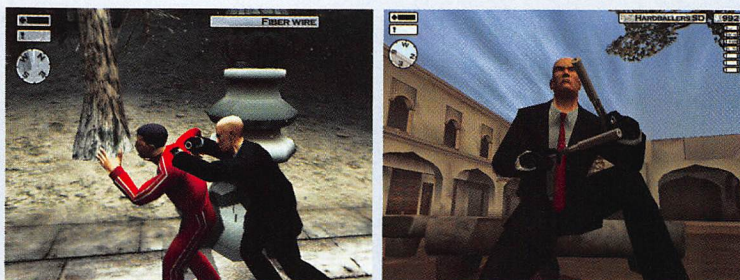
Dave Halverson

Hitman 2: Silent Assassin

XB PS2

play rating ●●●●●

developer: IO interactive / publisher: eidos / available: now



You're a hitman, dragged from retirement to spill blood yet again, battling your conscience while wrapping a piano wire around your foe's neck. You're silent if you want to be, aggressively wanton if you feel a good killing spree is the right way to go. Use a golf club or pull out a pistol, disguise yourself as a merchant or walk up without fear and let the victim know who is ending his life. *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* is a deep, refreshingly stylistic adventure

that lets you play at the pitch you desire. The game is a little clumsy and doesn't always deliver on its bold ideas, but I was never once less than absorbed into its richly atmospheric, elegantly drawn world of crime and redemption. The story carries the game far when the action threatens to deflate, elevated by an underpinning of dramatic, cinematic presentation.

Brady Fiechter

Medal of Honor: Frontline

XB

play rating ●●●●●

developer: ea la / publisher: ea / available: now



A game like *Medal of Honor: Frontline* is a testament to the power of grand game-making, an extraordinary virtual escape to the second World War, where compelling, sometimes disturbing scenarios leave us sweaty and in awe. Few games hit with this kind of raw energy. First appearing on the PlayStation 2, this Xbox transplant looks even better than what was already

a visual triumph. There seems to be even more chaos onscreen with a smoother delivery, but the impact of the game remains constant: Every level puts you in the heart of war, driving the intriguing imagery forward with incredible battles of first-person design mastery. I love every single part of this game.

Brady Fiechter

Disney's PK: Out of the Shadows

PS2

play rating ●●●●●

developer: ubi soft milan / publisher: ubi soft / available: now



I really hope *PK* doesn't get lost in the Holiday shuffle. There's a sea of critters and kooks running amok on the PS2 these days; *Ty*, *Ratchet & Clank*, *Sly Cooper*, *Dr. Muto*, *Malice*, and they're all great games, but you'd have to be a quack not to have a go at *PK*. This is a quality adventure/platformer/shooter through and through. If Disney has a dark side, and God knows it needs one, *PK* is it—a masked, pissed off, gun-wielding duck on a search and destroy (and when he has time) rescue mission. *PK* jumps, hovers, shoots, strafes, and sneaks his way through elaborate labyrinths and canyons (Area 52 anyone?) littered with aliens called Evronians, guided by a floating virtual head in a bubble. What's not to love? Every aspect of the game shines as only the best Ubi Soft platformers do, this one out of Ubi Milan, with a cool techno guise achieved through clever cel-shading, wispy effects, and filtered light. *PK*'s weapon even gets into the action, doubling as a mini space craft—so cool! It's really a special game—try not to miss it.

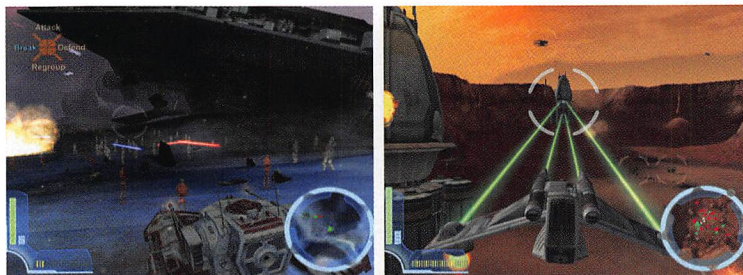
Dave Halverson

Star Wars Clone Wars

play rating ●●●●●

GC

developer: pandemic studios / publisher: lucas arts / available: now



If you enjoyed *Episode II* as much as I did, you are sure to get a good, little kick out of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*. Picking up near the end of that film, this game drops you right into the action in the battle of Geonosis. At this stage, you play as Mace Windu, and like all the non-vehicle-based portions of the game, it's not so great. This engine was designed to accommodate vehicles, not free-roaming characters. But no matter, you'll quickly find yourself in a Republic battle tank, and from here things start to get good and tasty. With great control, good graphics, and a very intense level of action, sweat will be dripping from your brow in no time. In fact, you might just get too sweaty, as this game is harder than you might expect. It's not the sort of satisfying difficulty that great games have, but the theme carries it well through some of its more frustrating missions.

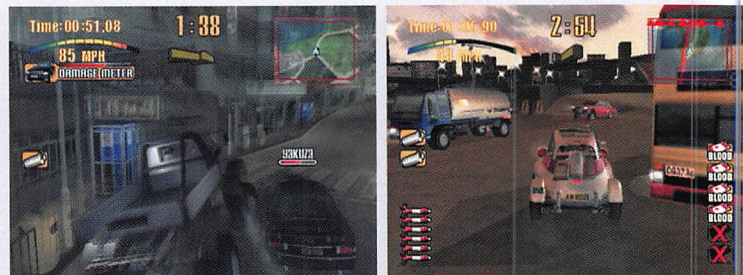
Michael Hobbs

Wreckless: The Yakuza Missions

play rating ●●●●●

GC

developer: broadsword int. / publisher: activision / available: now



The further down the food chain this game slides spec-wise, the better it gets. *Wreckless* is starting to look like a different game altogether, which is a good thing. While it doesn't look nearly as good as it did on Xbox, it plays a lot better on the 'Cube with added difficulty, all-new adventures (including all Dragon romps) and rocket power! Yep, ramming the Japanese mafia wasn't enough, now you can shoot rockets at them—not as if it makes a difference in a game of ramming,

destruction and little else. Sure, it's mission-based, but no mission would be complete without mass hysteria. I know there's a contingent out there that likes infinite crashing simulations, and to them I say you've hit pay dirt! Nothing in this game is out of bounds; if it's on the map, you can cream it. Activision should seriously consider re-releasing this game on Xbox as *Wreckless: Gaiden* or something. Nice save!

Dave Halverson

Treasure Planet

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: bizarre creations / publisher: scea / available: now



Treasure Planet is the epitome of what a Disney game should be: fast, fun, beautiful, fluidly animated, easy to pick up, and full of instantly likeable characters voiced by accomplished actors. *Treasure Planet* has all of the above going for it along with a Bizarre Creations' pedigree—meaning it's developed by one of the UK's leading studios and it shows. Split between action-platform levels loaded with gameplay—like snappy platforming, timing maneuvers, and special power-up based

errands—and solar surfing levels that are just pure fun, the gameplay never lets up for a second, and it's all tied together by pristine DVD quality scenes from the film. The game has a special look about it, too, indicative of the movie's motif, but also uniquely alive with an almost rubbery look and feel. *Fur Fighters* was such a fantastic game, it's great to see this team back in the saddle. This is one Disney game you don't want to miss.

Dave Halverson

The Simpsons' Skateboarding

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: code monkeys / publisher: ea / available: now

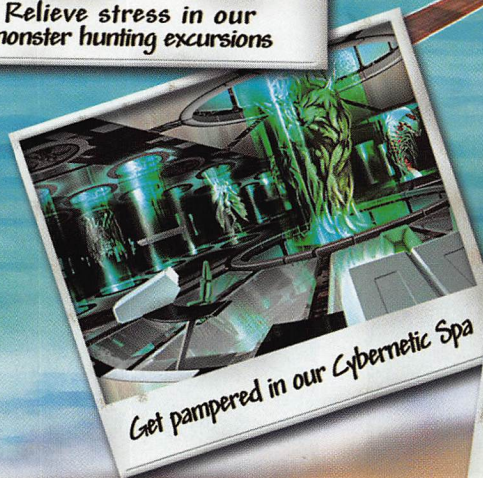


Like *South Park*, *The Simpsons* just keep rolling along, season after season, pleasing their peeps and recruiting the odd newbie. Too bad Cartman, Kyle, and Stan don't have EA in their corner. *The Simpsons* have had a successful run of games that shows no signs of culminating in a tragic cart racer. Of the now multi-hit franchise, *Simpsons' Skateboarding* is probably the best game yet. Springfield has been transformed into a massive skate zone that's yours to shred, and although the geometry remains the same, as it must, there's still some gas in the Simpsons' tank. Worth mentioning, when the time allotment runs out for tasks, you can keep skating. I found this most refreshing, as I hate the timed shopping-list-type levels these games regurgitate. Otherwise, there's nothing I can say about this game that you don't already know if you're familiar with the type, 'cept maybe that Krusty's long board is hella cool, and that the framerate dips just a smidgeon now and then—but you can barely tell. Overall, the Code Monkeys have done EA proud.

Dave Halverson

A Vacation Getaway

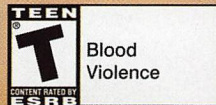
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Spyro: Enter the Dragonfly

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2

developer: equinox / publisher: universal interactive / available: now



Insomniac had the sense to close the book after the third chapter in their enchanting fairy-tale of bright dragons and spritly creatures, handing the spent pen over to ostensible strangers. This first Spyro adventure for the new era of gaming strains under a shoddy engine that yearns for color and charm, and despite a few new touches to the gameplay dynamic—a couple new vehicles and side tasks, the occasional new move—the game never manages to capture your interest. And for all its surface flaws, perhaps most disappointing of all is the languid feel that strains to recall the finer points of the past, immensely better games of the series. At its best, *Spyro: Enter the Dragonfly* entertains with the staple gameplay that Insomniac worked so hard to perfect, but the game ultimately feels flat and recycled, a perfunctory exercise to suck in the remaining loyalists.

Brady Fiechter

Evolution Worlds

play rating ●●●●●

GC

developer: sting / publisher: ubi soft / available: now



Mag Launcher, son of Asroc, hasn't seen his Dad the aristocrat in three years. Ever since Linear, a traumatized blonde girl with the ability to magically heal plants who also likes to attack things with a frying pan, showed up with a mysterious letter from his father, he's been upholding the family trust by relic-hunting. Together, Mag and Linear (along with either a gun-totin' hussy named Pepper Box who hangs out at a milk bar and hits on pre-pubescent kids, Gre the butler, or Gear the flying tomboy) keep the family rollin' in fame and fortune by taking assignments from The Society

and tomb-raiding every day away. In case you hadn't guessed, all of that is about to change. Unfortunately, that change comes by way of repetitive dungeon schemes and three-year-old technology. Otherwise, Sting's cute and clever dungeon RPG actually still kind of works. If you don't mind antiquated models, a one-horse town and the odd rat wearing an earring, this is a solid game full of witty (and well-spoken) dialogue and stacks of ever-changing dungeons.

Dave Halverson

Sub Rebellion

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: irem / publisher: irem / available: now



This game was a bit of a surprise. I've always liked Irem's 2D shooters, but I didn't really expect that they would make such a good 3D shooter, as it's such a different beast. But they have in *Sub Rebellion*, and the biggest shame is that this game will fly right under the radar of most gamers; it's not quick like most shooters. *Sub Rebellion* moves at its own aquatic pace, but the game design supports the caveat perfectly. There's

this great sort of tension created by the inability to swing around instantly and blast an enemy sub. You've got to put a bit of thought into the way you approach your targets, and this is made easier by the awesome sonar ping that lights up bogies in a cool-looking wire-frame. Throw in some fun surface sequences and you've got a really well-rounded, classic shooter.

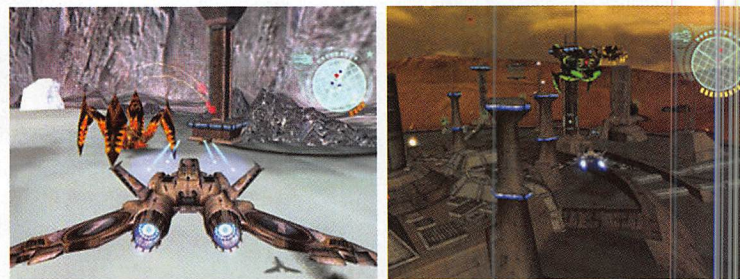
Michael Hobbs

Defender

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2 XB

developer: 7 studios / publisher: midway / available: now



If you read the title "*Defender*" and have no fuzzy feelings inside, don't worry: This successful update to the classic shooter will entertain you despite your neophyte history (shame on you for not playing games years ago). For the rest of us who remember dropping quarters and staying up late nights to drink in those blips and bleeps and exciting flashes of light of the original *Defender*, this 3D interpretation is entertainingly faithful to the original, with signature enemies and movement patterns recalling the past. Mixing the old with the new, think *Starfox*-influenced action across nicely appealing, widely structured alien settings from planet surfaces to the depths of space. The action is always set on high and the immediacy of the appeal lends itself to strong replay. This is one of the best classic updates out there.

Brady Fiechter

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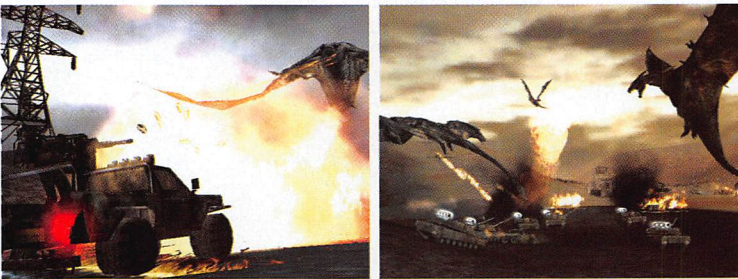
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Reign of Fire

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2 XB PC

developer: **kujo** / publisher: **bam** / available: **kujo**

Did you like driving the dune buggy around in *Halo*, shooting alien scum like fish in a barrel? If so, well, this is similar, only you're taking orders from a hick—"git yer ass over thar!"—and shooting at dragons... Oh, and there's no beach. Anyway, you get the gist. I didn't see *Reign of Fire*, but playing the game, I'm thinking the movie's about people in pick-ups, tanks, and planes blasting the hell out of really nasty air-and ground-based dragons that consider human outposts drive-thru restaurants. For what it is, I must say, the game is done right, like the colonel does chicken (and would do dragon if this ever happened, cuz we'd eat the sumbitches). It's gritty and grey, a joy to control, and above all, it's unique in its presentation, allowing the player to play as human or dragon. The models are quality all around and the missions are produced in such a way as to create tension and convey the feeling you really are out for the good of humanity, or at least what's left of it. Bam! continues to impress me at every turn, as they are fast becoming the king of the small shops.

Dave Halverson

Unreal Tournament 2003

play rating ●●●●●

PC

developer: **digital extremes and epic games** / publisher: **infogrames** / available: **oct**

For *UT2003*, the developers have upped the ante in all areas—graphics, gameplay and sound—and the end result is nothing short of fantastic. Returning players will be familiar with Deathmatch, CTF and Domination modes (now Domination 2.0, a slight variant of the original), but the new Bombing Run is, by far, the most fun. The objective: get the ball into a goal, either by shooting it in (three points) or jumping through it (seven points). Players can pass or run with the ball. The catch here is that

if you have the ball, you can't use your weapons. Without good teamwork, it is literally impossible to score. Aside from that, the biggest change in *UT2003* lies in the visuals. Players are treated to dynamic lighting, brilliant explosions, unbelievable arenas and very cool player models. Combined with top-notch sound effects, new weapons, and special moves, it will leave you speechless.

Tom Ham

Marvel vs Capcom 2

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom** / available: **now**

Marvel vs Capcom 2 may not live on the cutting edge of technology, looking dated even when placed next to the latest and aging *Street Fighter*, but there is no denying the intermitable appeal of a great 2D fighter, especially when it's coming from the masters at capcom. The Marvel influence has led to a manic fighting engine that leans more on insane combos and tag-team brutality, leaching the strategy element a bit, but this three-on-three fighter still packs typical Capcom precision and tightness. Over 56 characters go toe-to-toe,

giving you more variety than you could possibly demand. The only big downside to all this is a dated engine that shows wear in the animation, which may have passed the test on Dreamcast but loses appeal in today's arena.

I'd take any other capcom fighter over *Marvel vs capcom 2*, but who am I to say; this is not a game for the new breed of gamer, but you know exactly what you want. Go get it.

Brady Fiechter

Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Outcast

play rating ●●●●●

XB

developer: **vicarious visions** / publisher: **lucas arts** / available: **now**

Star Wars console games have traditionally had a bit of a spotty history. Sometimes great (*Rogue Squadron*), sometimes rather poor (*Obi-Wan*). This hasn't quite been the case on PC, as most Lucas efforts have been quite good. Case in point is this Xbox conversion of the popular PC title, *Jedi Knight II*. Having survived the journey to Xbox quite comfortably with just the occasional slow down giving the game away, this is a solid, mostly attractive FPS that will give quite a thrill to the die-hard Star Wars fan. The ambience of the game is dripping with the details of the Star Wars universe, from the basic look of corridors to the all-important sound effects. Especially cool is the ability to use a light sabre for some classic combat, but this is a shooter first and foremost, and in this regard, it's pretty good. It of course can't compete with something like *Halo* (what a cliché this phrase has become), but it's a nice effort.

Michael Hobbs

Be all that you can be.



VIDEO GAMER



MOVIE GOER



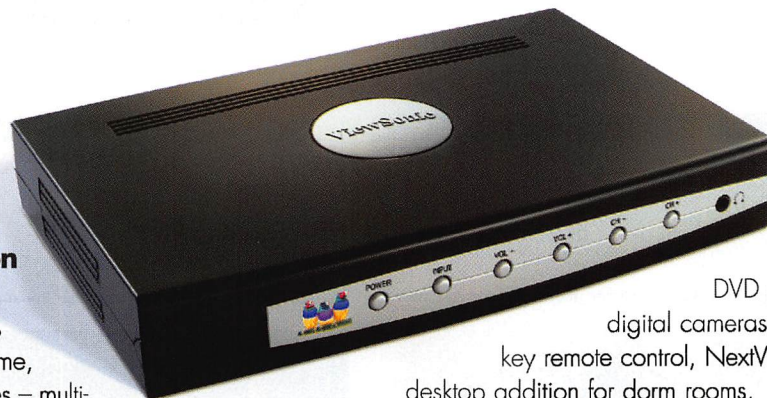
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Evolution Skateboarding

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2

developer: konami osaka / publisher: konami of america / available: now



Once again Konami has ventured into a genre where they just can't compete—extreme sports. Where the title suggests that the game is a progression forward, *Evolution Skateboarding* feels more like a regression. Although it has a very smooth framerate and better than average graphics, the most crucial element—the gameplay—never really pans out. Not even with the addition of boss confrontations or the ability to skate as Solid Snake makes this game worth buying. My biggest complaint is the sluggish control set; executing long combos is an exercise in futility. And the fact you have to hold down the manual button (triangle) to keep it going is simply preposterous; it's nearly impossible to transition to a grind or another trick. When you throw in poor level design, a completely inept announcer, boring music and no online gameplay, you're left with a game that should never have been developed in the first place.

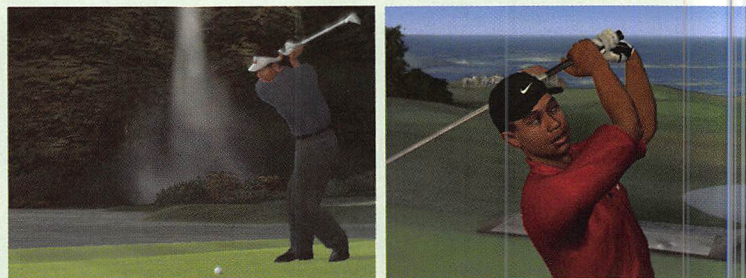
Tom Ham

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2003

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2 XB PC

developer: ea sports / publisher: ea sports / available: now



Last year, EA Sports surprised all of us when they released their polished and much-improved *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2002*. Showcasing state-of-the-art graphics and a spanking-new game engine, it was the closest players could get to the real thing. For '03, EA continues the tradition with new courses, new characters and a cool online component that will surely make golf fans grin from ear to ear. This go around, players will spend most of their time in the new Play Now mode.

Here, you're given 50 scenarios where you are immediately thrown into the heart of competition. Egomaniacs note: You will also finally be able to see how you compare with other players from around the world; EA Sports is launching a new online ranking system where players can post stats and records. Just remember: practice makes perfect; EA is planning on having tournaments for top players—complete with prizes and other cool stuff.

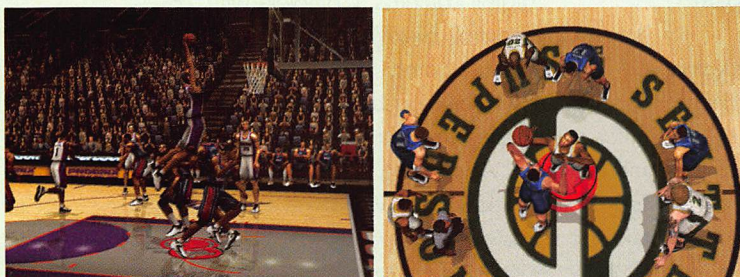
Tom Ham

NBA Inside Drive 2003

play rating ●●●●●

XB

developer: high voltage software/microsoft / publisher: microsoft / available: now



When *Inside Drive 2002* was released last year, it was undoubtedly a good start for developer High Voltage. Although it couldn't keep up with Sega's *NBA 2K2*, the gameplay and visuals were better than most sports aficionados anticipated. But, yet again—sadly—*Inside Drive* comes up a bit short when compared to other '03 b-ball games. Its biggest flaw: the lack of innovation. Although excellent Dynasty and Create-A-Player modes have been added, the game still plays like last

year's. And visually, it can't even begin to compete with the superlative graphics of *2K3* or EA's *Live 2003*. But among the flaws, the one high point is sound: *Inside Drive* sports four commentators, three in the booth and one on the floor; their play-by-plays are spot-on and some of their smack talk is downright hysterical. Plus, with all the hype surrounding Xbox Live, *Inside Drive 2003* doesn't even support online gameplay. Go figure.

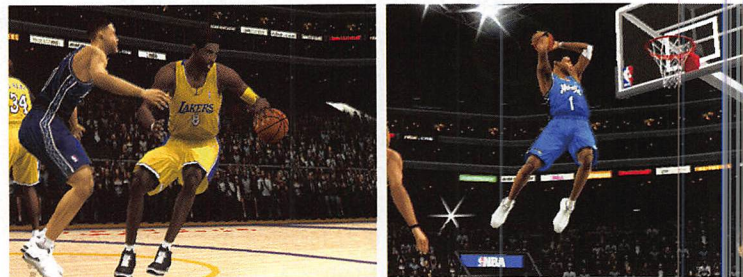
Tom Ham

NBA Starting Five

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: konami osaka / publisher: konami of america / available: now



It's no secret that Konami and sports do not go hand-in-hand. Other than their popular *Perfect Striker* series, every sports game that Konami has put out just can't compete and this latest basketball effort, *NBA Starting Five*, is no exception. On paper, *Starting Five* looks promising—a solid feature set showcasing Franchise, Season and Playoff modes, and even a Create-A-Player option. But the game falls apart in its execution. Quite frankly, it's not very fun to play. The defensive-heavy A.I. makes it nearly impossible to perform jump shots and outside plays. Almost every game turns into a dunk or lay-up contest—that gets really boring, *really* quick. Plus, visually, the player models and animations are uninspiring, especially when compared to the likes of *Live 2003* and *2K3*; and the lackluster sound effects and repetitive play-by-play commentary guarantee that this game will go straight to the recycle bin.

Tom Ham

FIFA 2003

words tom ham

FIFA 2003 is the most realistic and technically advanced soccer game to date. In fact, it's almost too real. Where in 2002 the primary goal of the A.I. was to create passing and shooting lanes and box out the player with the ball, in '03, the A.I. is now focused on three areas: teamwork, team tactics and real-player attributes. Defenders now square up against an opponent, thus making it easier to defend against charging forwards. There are over 10,000 players and 450 teams in the game, and each player plays according to their real-life counterpart. So if a player has a high ball-handling rating, it's harder for players to take the ball away from him. But probably the most important enhancement to the game is the vastly improved ball control and physics. In

previous *FIFA* games, no matter how many times you moved around, the ball always stayed with you. For '03, players have to make adjustments as they're running to maintain control of the ball; this also applies to passing and shooting. If you're sprinting down the pitch, you're less inclined to make an accurate pass or shot on goal. Free kicks have also been made more realistic; players can now set the power and swerve of kicks, as well as setting the angle for goal shots. The visuals, too, have been overhauled. When you combine all this with EA's brilliant presentation, the superlative soundtrack, and the excellent play-by-play of John Motson, you've got the definitive soccer game for any system.

"...the most realistic and technically advanced soccer game to date."



The visuals are so lifelike; you can even make out the players' faces in the game

fifa 2003

PS2 GC XB PC

developer: ea canada
publisher: ea sports
available: october

It's quite evident that EA Sports is at the very top of their game with this latest *FIFA* outing. This is the best—period.

play rating ●●●●●

NHL FaceOff 2003

words tom ham

While other sports game developers are innovating and advancing their respective games, 989 Sports is still in the process of rebuilding. However, as with all 989 Sports titles, *NHL FaceOff 2003* is a mixture of successes and failures. On the plus side, the game sports a new Career mode, allowing players to put on a General Manager's hat and build a team from scratch. Set within a multi-season format, players even have control of off-season player transactions for up to 10 years. In addition, you can select rookies, free agents and retired players. There is also a Create-A-Player feature where you can customize everything from equipment to facial features to individual skills. Gameplay, however, is a mixed bag. Even though *FaceOff 2003* allows

players to change their team's offensive and defensive strategies during the game, it's not helpful—no matter which strategies you choose, the outcome is always the same. The A.I., too, has always been an issue with 989 Sports games. Here, idiotic player behavior continues to rear its ugly head. Goalies pass the puck to opposing players, and my favorite: players will just stand still with the puck and will wait to get checked. Plus, I haven't seen such jagged edge players since the original PlayStation days. And what is this "butt check" business? Too often when you aim to check an opponent, your highlighted player will lead in with his ass. Overall, a decent effort, but 989 Sports has a long way to go if they want to compete with the big boys.

"...989 Sports has a long way to go if they want to compete with the big boys."



989 Sports either needs to get a new development team or start from scratch

nhl faceoff 2003

PS2

developer: 989 sports
publisher: scea
available: now

While this year's *FaceOff* is a definite improvement, 989 is definitely in urgent need of some development assistance.

play rating ●●●●●

Samus gears up for her third 2D epic

METROID FUSION

words dave halverson

This has been one spectacular Q4—between *Blinx*, *Rygar*, *Shinobi*, *ToeJam*, *StarFox*, *Mario*, *MechAssault*, *LoTR*, and many more on the console; we are knee deep in AAA entertainment on the GBA too, with *Yoshi's Island*, *Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, *Contra* and more. However, best of all, what's really making this a year to cherish are two *Metroid* games in the same month, each worthy of "Game of the Year" status for their respective platforms—not to mention that they talk to each other. When Nintendo fires the big guns, it's a shot heard 'round the world.

Fusion, and the few games of its caliber on the over-saturated troubled system, is why you bought a GBA. Equipped with a Gamester Flood Light and quality headphones, *Metroid Fusion* doesn't compare to *Super Metroid*—it surpasses it. I know that's saying a lot, but properly rigged, this game burns that tiny screen directly into your cortex vortex. The jury is still out on ambience, but the gameplay, graphic detail, animation, and story integration are all the stuff that 32-bit 2D dreams are made of. Without revealing

any story details, take everything that you loved about *Metroid* and *Super Metroid* and imagine them magnified, modified, and improved upon. In *Fusion*, Samus' link to the navigation computer, and you, is heightened dramatically as she thinks out-loud, drawing you into her troubled psyche like never before. Beyond the inherent threat of peril, claustrophobic labyrinths and isolation, we finally get to know her—the same goes for *Prime*—giving these *Metroids* a more personal interface in your face. Nintendo has spared no expense, going for broke on *Fusion*'s graphics and sound: transparencies, lighting, animation, detail—everything is polished beyond belief. They've gone so far as to expose 90% of what's available for the system as inferior crap, shining a light directly on the worst software glut since the Atari 2600. *Fusion* also proves that modern 2D can still captivate in a 3D world, something even I had begun to doubt of late. The game is simply the gold standard for 2D, plain and simple. If you don't have an Advance, buy one for this game; and if you do, well, you know what to do. **play**

"Take everything that you loved about *Metroid* and *Super Metroid* and imagine them magnified, modified, and improved upon."

Samus shoots the tube—literally. A few carefully placed missiles or charge beams will end this silly boss's pathetic existence.



Metroid Fusion

GBA

developer: nintendo / publisher: nintendo / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

A game in league with *Super Metroid* and *Symphony of the Night*, *Metroid Fusion* is a truly legendary 2D experience and the best handheld game that exists to date.



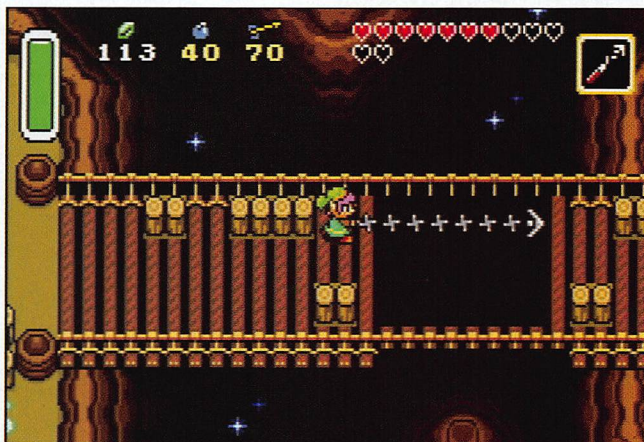
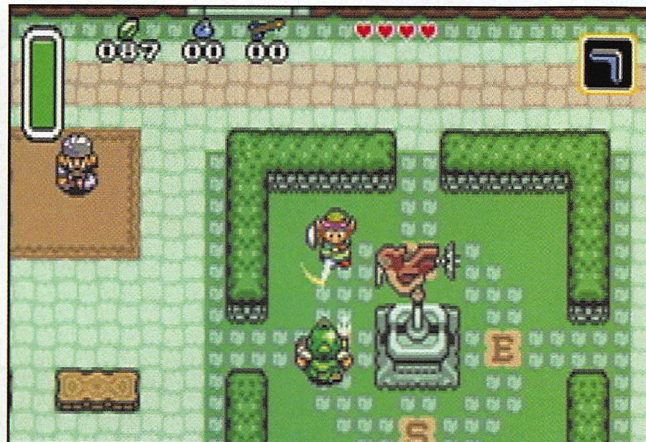
Another towering classic comes to GBA

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

A LINK TO THE PAST / FOUR SWORDS

words michael hobbs

"A Link to the Past is one of the best SNES games ever made, and it's found a new home on GBA."



Look at the cute, little graphics. They don't make games look like this anymore. A pity.

I wouldn't trade my history of game playing for anything, and I don't often envy new players who've missed out on some classic experiences. But I have to admit, I wish I was a new gamer so I could experience this game for the first time. *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* is one of the best SNES games ever made, and it's found a new home on GBA, losing absolutely nothing in the translation. In fact, it's even gained a few things, like Link's voice samples from *Ocarina of Time*, and an all-new, multiplayer game called *Four Swords*. Here, you and up to three fellow Links can team up (each resembling the new cel-shaded Link from the upcoming GameCube game) through the GBA link cable and enjoy competitive and cooperative play through various dungeons, the goal being to collect as many Rupees as possible.

Of course, the star of this show is the pitch-perfect conversion of *A Link to the Past*, and the game holds up fantastically well. In fact, shrunk down to the GBA screen, it actually looks a bit better, with all the cute, little detail even more appealingly rendered. But it's in the play that this game shows why it is so highly regarded. This is Nintendo at its very best. It may be ten years old, but that means nothing when the experience is so deeply satisfying. The dungeon design is perfect, and the sense of discovery and exploration is exactly what you would expect from the hand of Miyamoto and his team.

If you thought *Zelda* began with *Ocarina of Time*, do yourself a massive favor and play *A Link to the Past*. You'll thank me later. **play**

The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past / Four Swords

play rating ●●●●●

GBA

developer: nintendo / publisher: nintendo / available: now

This Game Boy Advance conversion of *A Link to the Past* gives new meaning to the phrase, "stands the test of time." The multiplayer game's not bad either.

@play online

unreal championship

developer: digital extremes / publisher: infogrames / available: now

XB

preview

If there were ever a reason to pick up an Xbox, *Unreal Championship* will make your decision a whole lot easier. Developed by Digital Extremes (the brilliant folks behind *Unreal*, *Unreal Tournament* and *Unreal 2003*), *UC* brings all the adrenaline-pumping, nail-biting, hardcore first-person shooter action to a next-generation console. Not only will you be able to play it offline (with state-of-the-art bots), kicking the ass of friends (or complete strangers) from around the world is just a button-tap away via Xbox Live. Are you smiling yet?

"Gamers have always been ready to go online with their consoles," explains James Schmalz, Creative Director at Digital Extremes, "but they never could do so with any success. Bringing *Unreal Championship* to the Xbox in conjunction with Xbox Live has given us the ability to create content that will deliver an experience unmatched by any other online console game out there." And after checking out *UC* first hand, the wait to go Live is damn near torture.

Here's a slight tease: If you've been exerting your trigger-happy aggression with *Unreal 2003*, then you're already familiar with the foundation for *Championship*. It's essentially *UT2003* on the Xbox. "Game modes include Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch, Capture the Flag, Domination 2.0 and Bombing Run," explains Schmalz. "All of these are in *UT2003* as well." Most of the maps from *UT2003* will also be in *Championship*, however, they'll be tweaked for console play; all the weapons and special moves will also be incorporated.

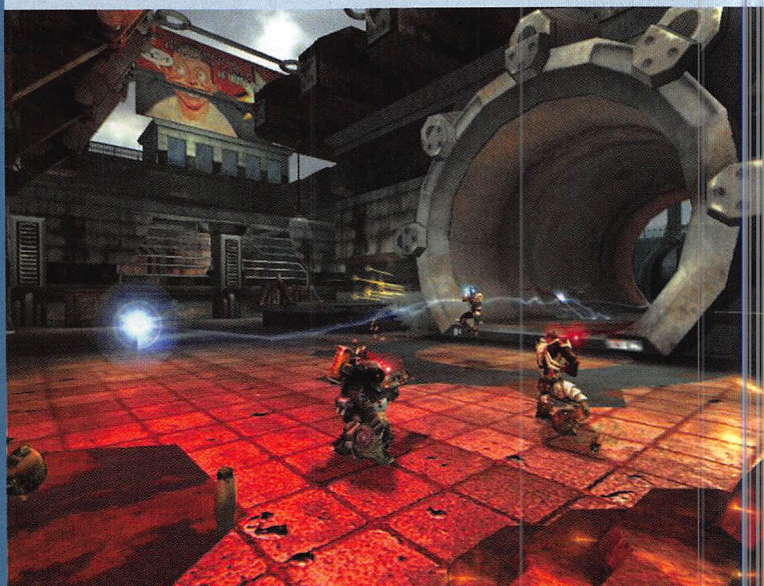
In addition, *Championship* will support four-player split-screen mode. "What's cool about multiplayer is that when a friend of yours wants to join a game, you don't have to restart," continues Schmalz. "Just plug in a controller and a player window will automatically open up. It's that easy."

What's more: The graphics in *Championship* will surely impress, too, with players being treated to dynamic lighting, brilliant particle effects, and wicked death animations. "*UC* will incorporate 'rag doll physics,'" explains Schmalz, "so when you kill an opponent, their body will react to the environment around them." Bodies flipping, gyrating and explode in the air—simply brilliant.

Xbox Live launching with *Unreal Championship* at its side is a match made in heaven.

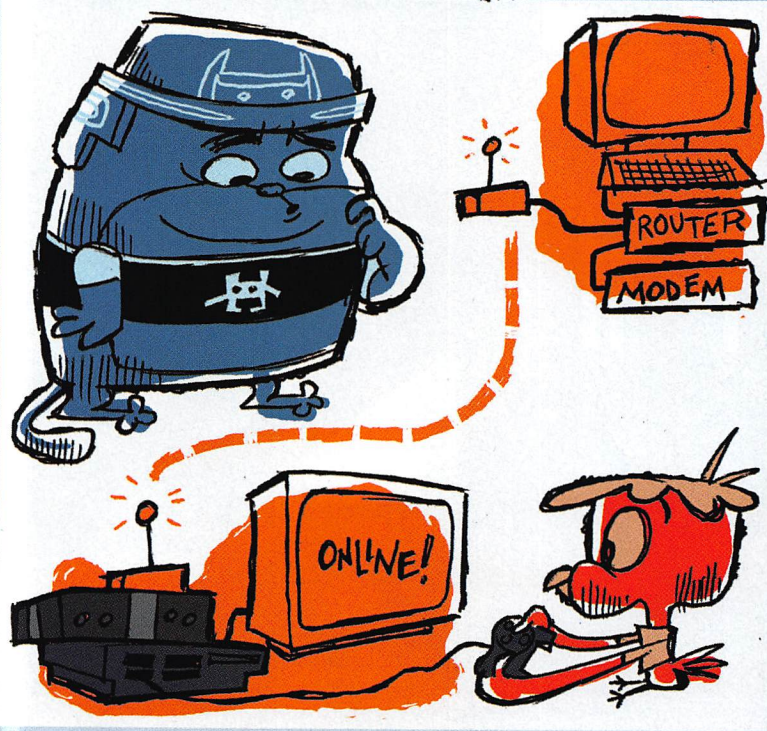
Tom Ham

"If there were ever a reason to pick up an Xbox, *Unreal Championship* will make your decision a whole lot easier."



Bet you didn't expect to see a game like this for Xbox live.





get unt@ngled

Our handy, easy-to-decipher guide to taming the home networking beast—for the console, that is.

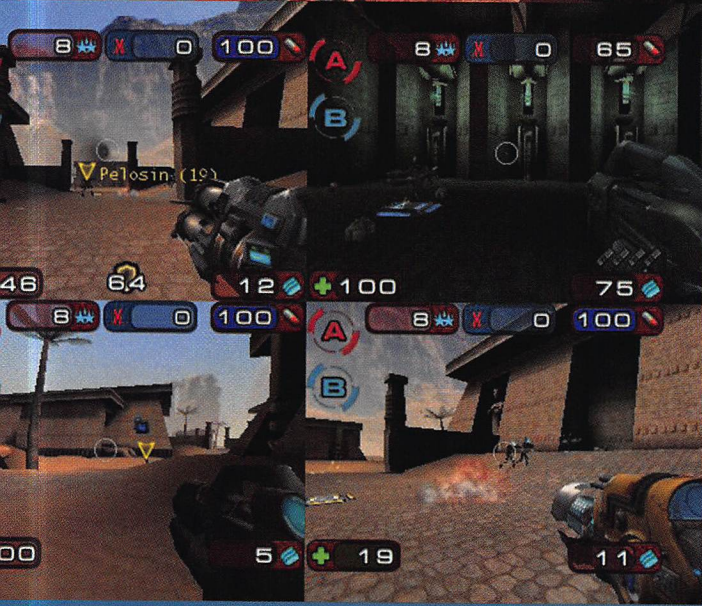
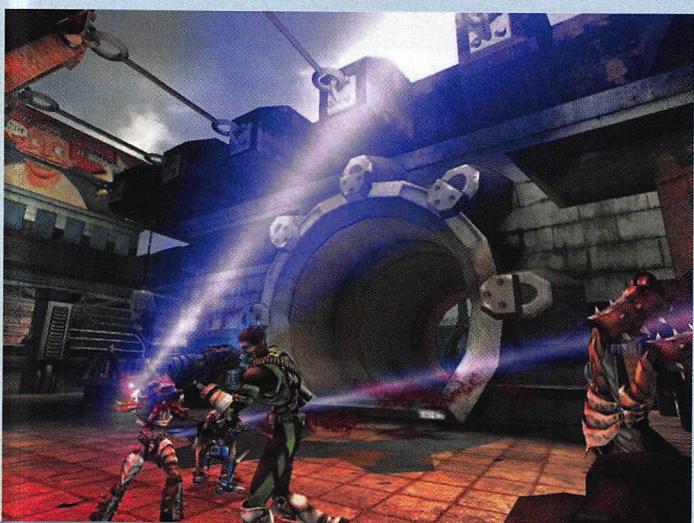
Since the PS2 has been running on all of its online cylinders for the last few months—and the Xbox is just beginning to rev its bandwidth engine—there are a few basic home networking principles that will help transform your gaming area (or areas) from junked-up jungle of Ethernet cables into a neat and orderly play room.

"Home networking is one of the fastest growing segments of the computer industry," explains Brad Warnock, Director of Marketing for Phonex Broadband. "The sharing of broadband Internet access is the driving force behind connecting multiple computers." To consolidate those expanses of cables—instead of running cords from the DSL/cable modem in your bedroom (where your PC probably is) all the way into your living room (which, quite possibly, is down a flight of stairs)—two devices are key: a **router** (preferably one with 4 ports) and **wireless bridges**. With both, you're able to transmit an Internet signal throughout your entire house *invisibly*. The technology is similar to that of a cordless phone, only much more powerful, allowing high-speed broadband connections to be broadcast through walls and floorboards.

It's extremely simple. 1) Connect your modem and one wireless bridge to the router; 2) then connect as many other bridges as you need around your house (one in the living room, another in your home office, and even another in the, er, bathroom; you can literally have over a dozen units scattered about). All the wireless bridges we tested required absolutely no installation of software—"plug and play," which is as simple as it sounds (Phonex's NeverWire 14 being the easiest); which, for the most part, will help avoid the disintegration of your eardrums while listening to dreadful hold music on a tech support line. Also, bridges are typically compatible with all brands of routers. Shopping around for cheaper models is highly recommended. The overall investment will should set you back no more than \$400—costly but very efficient.

To make the task a bit easier, below is a reference chart featuring some of the most reliable wireless networking gear on store shelves (whether those be virtual or physical; generally, though, lower prices can be found online).
Let the online wars continue.

Jon M Gibson



wireless routers

Brand/Model	Price*	Website
D-Link AirPlus DI-614+	\$149	www.d-link.com
Linksys Wireless Access Point Router	\$169	www.linksys.com
Belkin Wireless Cable/DSL Gateway Router	\$249	www.belkin.com
Netgear Cable/DSL 802.11b Wireless Router	\$181	www.netgear.com



wireless bridges

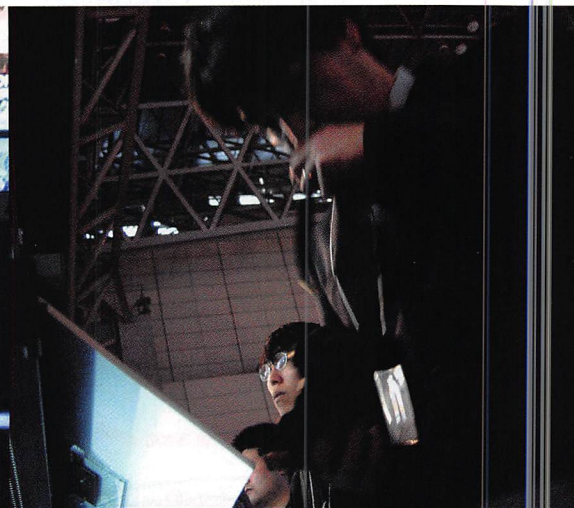
Brand/Model	Price*	Website
Phonex NeverWire 14	\$129	www.phonex.com
Linksys Wireless Access Point Router	\$129	www.d-link.com
Belkin Wireless Cable/DSL Gateway Router	\$129	www.linksys.com



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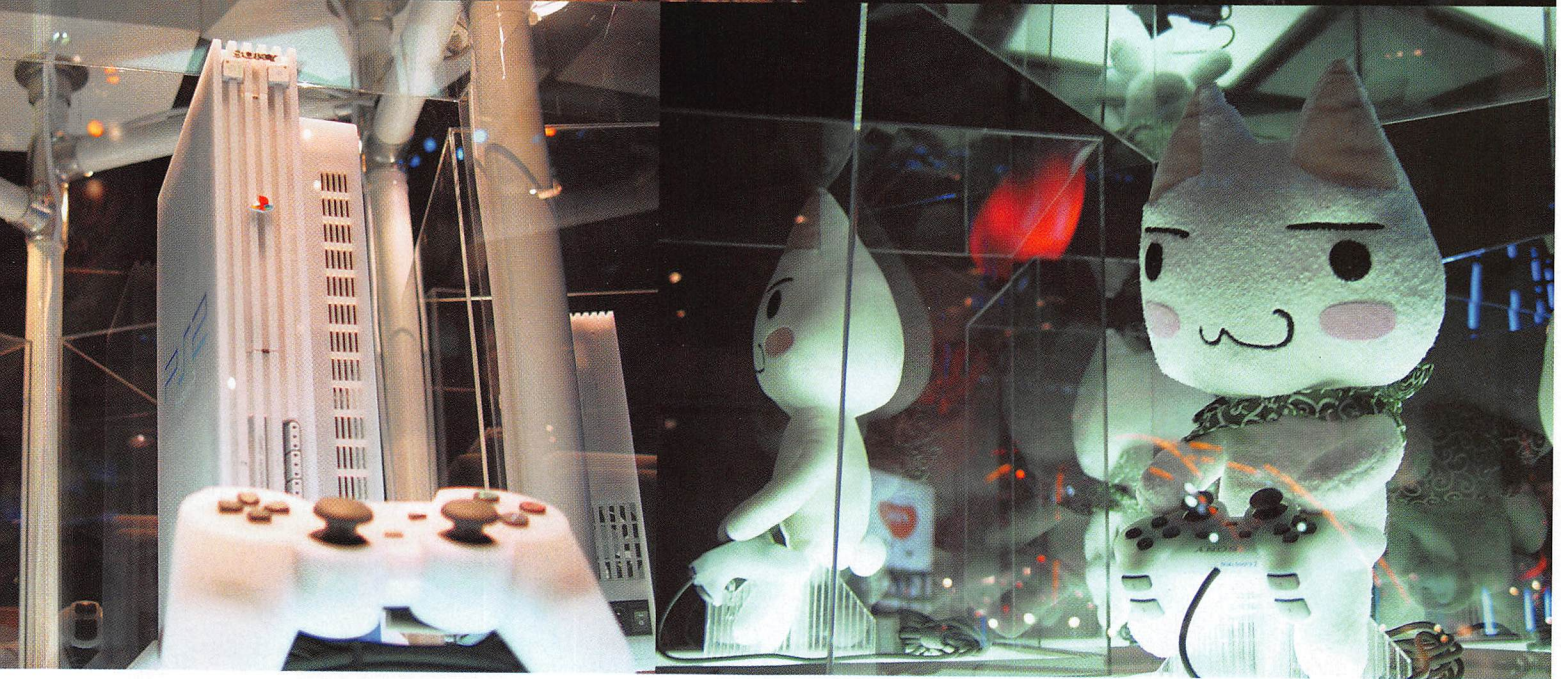


TOKYO GAME SHOW 2002

words + photos jon m gibson

Hardcore gamers aren't shy about their bias towards Japanese productions—for good reason. Not only are their games a solid example of advanced craftsmanship, but so are their conventions. Tokyo Game Show 2002, for instance, didn't just showcase some of Japan's hottest products for the coming year; the massive show floor also doubled as a costume party for the con's entire weekend run (September 20-22). But unlike similar American pageantry, the fans at TGS don't wait until the last minute to transform into their favorite videogame characters: they treat it as a delicate art, dedicating several months and hundreds of dollars to their "from-scratch" creations. Such intricate cos-players add a special dash of excitement to the overwhelming amount of electronic eye candy that makes TGS, year after year, a gamer's overseas paradise. **play**



















It's a Gundam fight!

MOBILE FIGHTER G-GUNDAM

words dave halverson

Giant Gundam's locked in a battle for galactic supremacy is the catalyst for *Mobile Fighter G-Gundam*. War is outdated in Future Century 0060. Instead, each nation sends their best Gundam fighter to Earth (the slum of the universe) for the prestigious Gundam Fight to whom the victor goes universal rule. The elite of humanity have long since fled to the space colonies, discarding the Earth and its remaining population like a worn-out sock. But there is still some semblance of law and order in the world, although the land is dilapidated and the people beaten down. Most aren't thrilled about the idea of giant robots using their cities as fighting venues (somewhere a galactic Don King is smiling) and we soon discover why. Gundams aren't very subtle when it comes to personal property, especially when they're flying backwards out of control.

This tournament, the thirteenth, gets off to a rough start: the local police chief is hell bent on stopping the fight, and Neo Japan's

fighter, Domon Kasshu, has more on his mind than just winning. When the two aren't at each other's throats, he's looking for his brother who fled to Earth in a stolen prototype Gundam, which landed their father a life sentence in suspended animation. Domon's not just out to claim victory for Neo Japan, but to clear his family name, and as you have probably deduced, he has one thing working against him—a conscious, and on Earth FC 0060, that can be a very dangerous thing.

What's different about *G-Gundam* in the scheme of the series? Everything; its human element is more deviant, and overall, way more colorful, it's based in less tech and more action, and the character design is a major departure, falling somewhere between the radically different *Gundam Wing* and *08th MS Team*. Just when you think they've pulled every trick out of their bag, Bandai finds another Gundam to send us in to the grand abyss once more. **play**

"G-Gundam's human element is more deviant, and overall, way more colorful..."



mobile suit g-gundam box #1

play rating ●●●●●

studio: bandai / rating: 13 & up / running time: 300 minutes

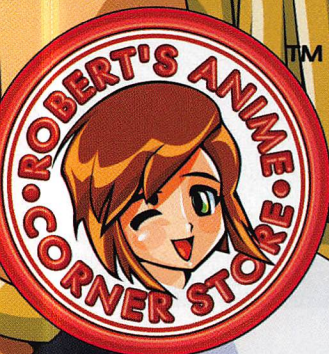
Gundam continues to flourish as each new series manages to put a unique spin on a classic category.

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Don't let the title scare you, there's nothing fruity about...

FRUITS BASKET

words dave halverson

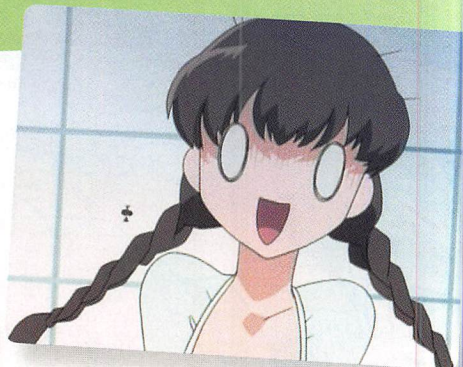
Fruits Basket; what does the title imply? A story about plastic fruit, or maybe one about a family cursed by the Chinese Zodiac whom when hugged by the opposite sex turn into animals? If you guessed the second option, congratulations. Sounds fruity though eh? I mean, "why would I watch something like that!" is probably what you're thinking, right? True, it's a mad farce chock full of sex charged young high school girls and teen angst, along with a touch of the wild kingdom, but it's presented in such a way that it's completely captivating, rich in drama, comedy, and the power of the human spirit. Hey, we bought Stuart Little and he's a talkin' mouse with a car.

The intrigue comes by way of a young girl named Tohru Honda who tragically lost her beloved mother in a car crash. Rather than stay with a relative she decides to live in a tent by herself, just her and a picture of her dearly departed mother whom she speaks to as if right by her side (try not to cry on the magazine). When she

is discovered by Yuki Souma the most popular boy in school, and his fractured family (whom when hugged by a female turn into a rat, cat, and a dog respectively) he discovers her secret (her tents on their property) but she in turn discovers there's, and the fun begins. And you thought *Ranma* was weird. When they change back, they're naked!

The production values of FB are really the star of the show transforming the material beyond the norm through flashbacks, caricature, and simplistic expression. *Fruits Basket* is easily one of the most impressive new dramadies to come along since *Tenchi* or *Ranma*. At the very least you'll never look at your kitty pooch or rat quite the same way again. Yuck, you have a rat? **play**

"And you thought *Ranma* was weird. When they change back, they're naked!"



fruits basket vol.1 - a great transformation

play rating ●●●●●

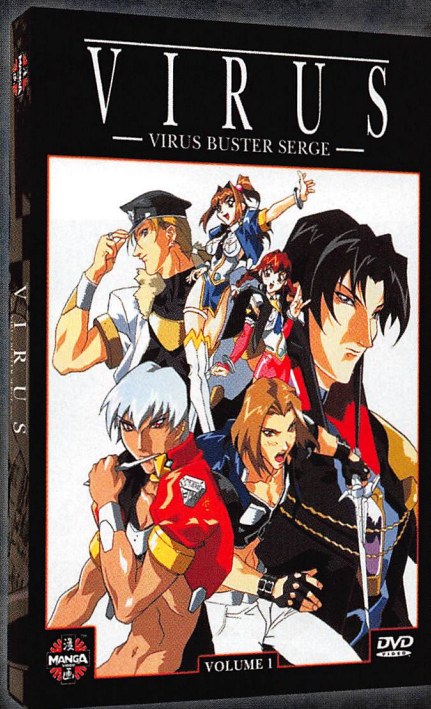
studio: funimation / rating: 13 & up / running time: 123 minutes

The best dramady since *Tenchi*, and *Fruits Basket* is better in every way. Funimation scores big with this one!

VIRUS

— VIRUS BUSTER SERGE —

VOLUME 1



VIRUS is the latest work of veteran anime director and character designer Masami Obari (**FATAL FURY: THE MOTION PICTURE** and **BATTLE ARENA TOSHINDEN**).

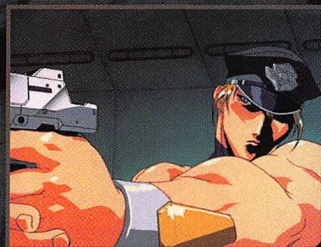
"MAY BE HIS BEST WORK YET, AND CERTAINLY HIS SEXIEST"
— ANIMERICA

NEO HONG KONG 2097 – Genetic engineering and advanced cybernetics have successfully fused man and machine. But alongside this new technology, mankind faces an insidious new threat... **THE VIRUS**.

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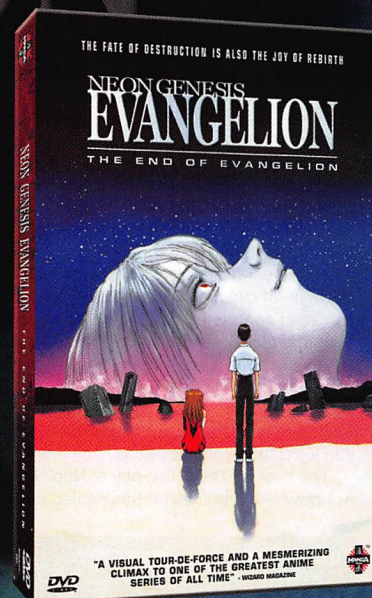
NEON GENESIS EVANGELION



"EVANGELION FANS REJOICE! THE WAIT IS OVER!"
— Wizard Magazine

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— Play Magazine



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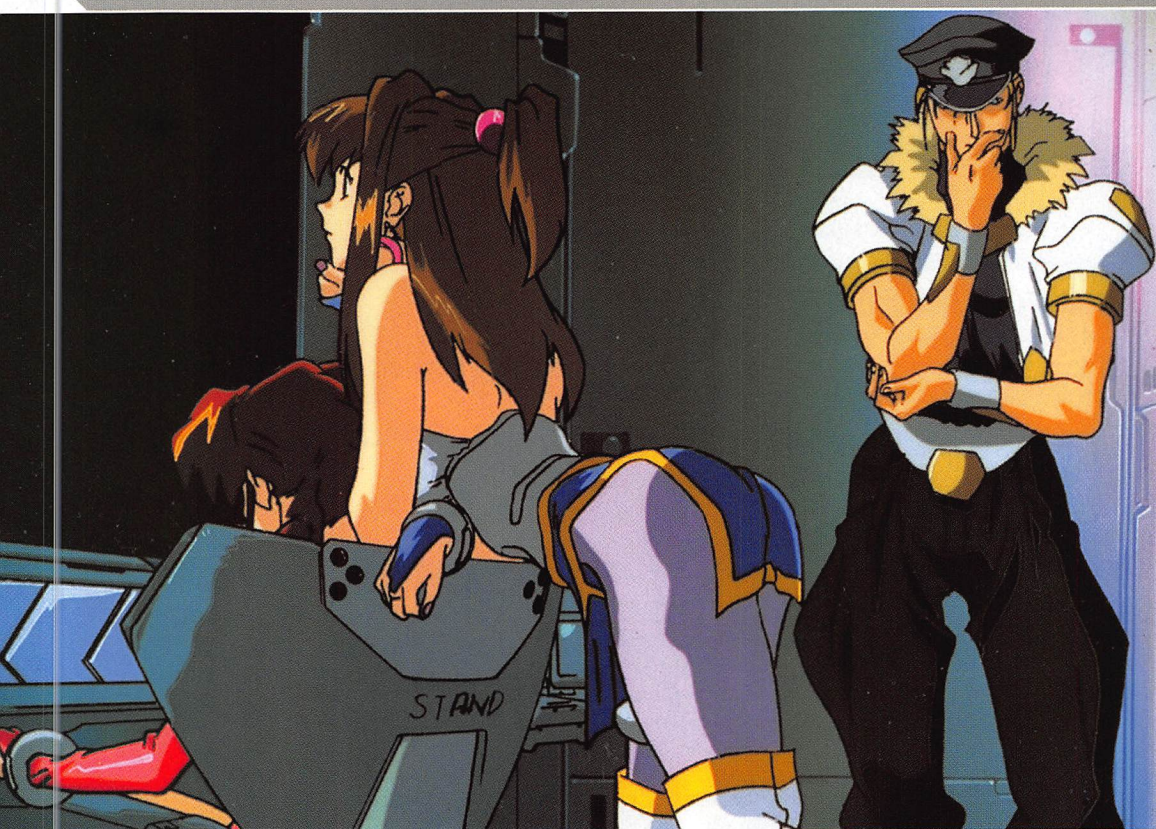


THE END OF EVANGELION
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VIRUS BUSTER SERGE

Obari applies his skills to a character-rich new serial

words dave halverson



"Virus bares a striking resemblance to Obari's *Detonator Orgun*..."

One thing I can say about Masami Obari: the guy knows his T&A and his 90210. *Virus Buster Serge*, while not nearly as jiggly as some of his other works, like *Gowkaiser* and *Toshinden*, is overflowing with hard bodies, only this is anime, so they're encased in hard suits, capable—for a limited time—of laying the smack down on some seriously grotesque beasts. Manga's latest, and truly one of their greatest, this fairly fresh 13-episode cyber tale gives us the deep, integral team-based storylines of *Burn Up W* or *Evangelion*, along with the highest caliber of animated sci-fi as only Obari can achieve. His style of clean, simplistic lines and color schemes contrasted by ultra-sharp facial features, plausible futuristic vehicles, and ultra-wide eyes gives off subtlety amidst mayhem, which is quite unlike anything else. *Virus* bares a striking resemblance to another Obari classic, *Detonator Orgun*, so if you liked that, you'll love this.

The year is 2097. The place: Neo Hong Kong, where human kind has settled into

an existence where bio-engineering and advanced cybernetics is commonplace—people fitted with non-organic enhanced parts and machines that can synchronize with human DNA. Of course, where there are computers there are viruses, only in this case we're talking super-intelligent computers and, so, proportionately more serious strains. In other words, your Mac in the future may feed thousands of tentacles into your skin and take you over. Not unlike *Bubblegum Crisis*' Boomer problem handled by Knight Sabers, Neo Hong Kong's rogue freakazoids are handled by STAND, five wonderful-looking human beings in suits called "variable gears" run by a guy by the name of Raven. In the first three episodes, the intrigue is set as we meet Serge, an amazing fighter who goes from trying to assassinate Raven to becoming his top fighter after Raven slips him into his very own suit. There's more to this relationship than meets the eye and plenty of mad machinery to fill in the blank spots. **play**



virus buster serge

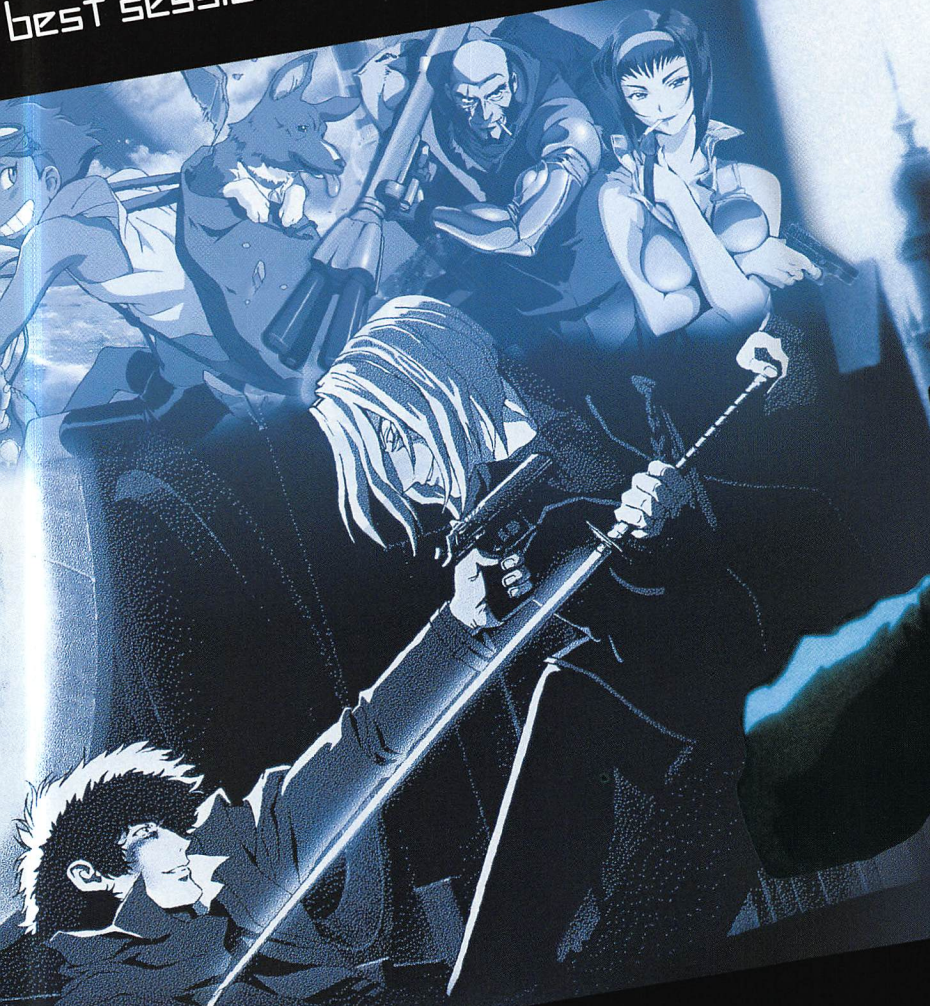
play rating ●●●●●

studio: manga entertainment / rating: 13 & up / running time: 120 minutes

Yet another classic sci-fi from Obari, topped off with a cool team vibe and enough shapely hard bodies to appease both sexes.

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Bob Brilliant, Jimmy Sparks, and Dick Strong get into it

GIGANTOR

words dave halverson

play rating ●●●●●

studio: rhino / rating: all ages / running time: 650 minutes

I still remember the first cartoons that ever took up residence in my fragile little mind when I was still knee high to a garden gnome—*Gigantor* and *Kimba the White Lion*. I knew zero about “anime,” but they both just stuck. I suppose *Kimba* instilled some sappy sense of pride and justice, but *Gigantor*? Must have been the ability to mash anyone who messes with you into a saucy pulp.

Watching the original black and whites in this outstanding DVD collection, it's amazing how blithe things were back in the '60s before we decided that violent programming turned kids into Jason. People die left and right in *Gigantor*, and there's more gunplay and violence than a Verhoeven marathon. I had forgotten all about these characters, too—Dr. Bob Brilliant, Jimmy Sparks, Inspector Blooper... and especially Dick Strong—Dick Strong! You gotta love Dick Strong. The guy snuck behind enemy lines in every episode, and when he got pinched he was like, “So, hey, I'm new. Nice glasses. Where's the infirmary?” And there's still nothing cooler than megalomaniacs bent on world domination for no apparent reason. They have armies, secret fortresses, women, money, super weapons... who needs the headaches? But that doesn't stop Dr. Cats Meow! (Dr. Evil, anyone?). Not that it ever mattered; once Jimmy Sparks wiggled the joystick on Gigantor's control box, it was over anyway. He just killed everything and then everyone partied. I love *Gigantor*! They use short wave radios in the year 2000, and say things like, “Crackpot or not, the man's clearly dangerous!”

Everyone needs to own this. **play**



studio: tokyopop / rating: 15 & up / running time: TBA

Aeon Flux meets anime

REIGN

words dave halverson

Kicking off another great year for anime—and TokyoPop, for that matter, who are on a major roll—yet another conglomeration is on the horizon and this one is very, very special. Utilizing character designs by *Aeon Flux* creator Peter Chung, directed by Rintaro (*Metropolis*) and produced by Madhouse (the studio behind *Vampire Hunter D*, *Bloodlust*, *Trigun*, and *Ninja Scroll*) comes *Reign*, formerly known as *Alexander* in Japan. The story parallels the perils of the ancient hero Alexander the Great himself, only in the distant future, mixing Greco-Roman with Japanese sci-fi influences. If you're thinking that ought to be interesting, you don't know the half of it. The first episode, “Obsession of Alexander,” goes down like too much of a good thing. I'm already worried about it ending, and it has just begun. The setting and pacing both take multiple viewings to wrap your brain around, but once you're in its wake, *Reign* is almost magical anime.

The universe is most compelling: man-eating horses, steam-powered flying machines, shape-shifting assassins, kings and queens, and all things regal, set among Chung's Peter-Maxon-LSD facades with a mythological mystique—Dali would be proud. If you're on the fence regarding anime, my good fellow, now may be a good time to succumb to its charms. **play**



KUROGANE

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play MEDIA



from MGM's *Die Another Day*

Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones



20th century fox
rated pg

movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

Okay, George, you're forgiven for *Episode I*. These things happen. You probably had a momentary lapse of reason, but it's looking like you're back on track now. Let's face it, *Star Wars* fans got burned with *The Phantom Menace*. But here's the makeup: Taking place ten years after *The Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones* begins with an assassination attempt on Padmé (who is now a Senator). With tensions high within the Republic, the Jedi Council send in Obi-Wan Kenobi (McGregor) and his young Padawan learner Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen) to protect her. This is where the two main storylines branch off. The first involves Obi-Wan investigating the assassination attempt and the second is the relationship developing between Anakin and Padmé. Unlike *Episode I*, where you could care less about the story, the two plotlines come together quite nicely in *Episode II*, all the way to the very end. A *Star Wars* movie wouldn't be a *Star Wars* movie, though, if it didn't have great action sequences; luckily, *Attack of the Clones* delivers tenfold. From the Obi-Wan and Jango Fett sequence to the light saber duels with Anakin and Count Dooku, it's all quite wondrous. And being able to see Mace Windu (Samuel L. Jackson) use his light saber in action is just too cool for words. Add to the package a great digital transfer: The scenes on Naboo were incredibly lifelike; just gazing at the swaying

grass and the mountain vistas left me speechless. From the opening speeder chase scene to the Jango flight scene with Obi Wan, it's a fantastic way to show off your home theatre system. With the release of *Episode II*, Lucas has gone back to his roots and created a movie along the same vein as *The Empire Strikes Back*. Sure, there is a love story thrown in, but it works. *Attack of the Clones* is one *Star Wars* movie fans shouldn't be ashamed of.

VALUE: Just like *Episode I*, this two disc set is packed with great features and extras, my favorite being the "Puppets to Pixels" documentary, showcasing how Industrial Light & Magic created the various digital characters in the movie, including the all-new Yoda. The other documentary, "State of the Art: The Previsualization of *Episode II*" is also very cool. Here, Lucas, producer Rick McCallum, and key members of the special effects team explain how they used animations and computers to plan out certain sequences in the movie. Truly fascinating stuff. There are also eight deleted scenes, complete with introductions as to why each was eliminated from the final cut. And lastly, a great commentary track with Lucas (which, by all historical accounts, is the first *feature-length* commentary he's done) and some of the film's key production folks rounds out this great two-disc set.

Tom Ham

Eight Legged Freaks

warner bros.
rated pg-13



movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

Camp—the genre, not the summertime fun zone for kiddies—is only as good as the filmmaker wants it to be. So after listening to the audio commentary from director Ellory Elkayem, it obvious that the entire cast and crew of *Eight Legged Freaks* truly embraced the goofiness of what they were actually doing. Unlike *Godzilla* and *Independence Day*, *Freaks* doesn't attempt to convince the audience that the giant spiders attacking Prosperity, Arizona are a reality (oddly enough, though, all three flicks are from the same producing team); instead, the movie follows in the footsteps of classic, black-and-white, giant bug movies of the 50s and 60s. The plot is incredibly basic: a toxic waste spill in a local pond causes some creepy, exotic spiders nearby to grow *really* big. David Arquette is perfect as the carefree leading man, and Kari Wuhrer plays her tough-as-nails sheriff to a key. Couple the spot-on casting with some fun, surprisingly solid special effects and *Freaks* makes for a quirky, all-around, amusing Saturday night.

VALUE: The filmmakers are quick to reveal that there's essentially only one real arachnid in the entire movie on the commentary (Elkayem, producer Dean Devlin, and co-stars Arquette and Rick Overton); and Elkayem's original short film, *Larger Than Life*, highlights the inspiration for this Hollywood version.

Jon M Gibson

The Scorpion King

universal
rated pg-13



movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

It's been said, on numerous occasions, that The Rock is a natural for taking the action hero reins from Arnold and Sly. It's true. He's got the build, that special preeminent superstar stature and, most importantly, the charisma. Needless to say, *The Scorpion King* is the showcase piece for all three. It may be formulaic in that sense—a mildly budgeted vehicle for a rising star—but as an action movie, you can't ask for much more. When compared to the movies it spun off from, *The Mummy* and its desperate sequel, *Scorpion King* is much better for a variety of reasons. It's full of popcorn moments, but it doesn't submerge itself in cheese; the swordplay is energized, but not too cliché; and it's all fueled by The Rock. Sure, the supporting cast borders on mediocrity, but in a fluffy flick like this, it's expected. As an action mantelpiece, *Scorpion King* is solid; if you're looking for Shakespeare, buzz off.

VALUE: This "collector's edition" is generously packed with goodies, including two commentaries: one from director Chuck Russell (revealing that the sword-shattering scene was shot using only hilts; the blades were added later using CGI); and another from The Rock. Aside from some considerably dull promo pieces, there's enough here—outtakes, making-of vignettes—to keep your blood pumping.

Jon M Gibson

newsbytes

words thomas chau

... **'AKIRA' LIVE:** *Variety* reports that Warner Bros. is planning to develop a live-action version of *Akira* to be directed by Steve Norrington (*Blade*). James Robinson (*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) will pen the screenplay; Jon Peters (*Batman*) will produce... **A SOAP OPERA X2:** The trailer for *X2*, the sequel to 2000's smash *X-Men*, will be placed in front of copies of *Solaris*

on November 27th and will reveal a kiss between Wolverine and Jean Grey—an indication that the love triangle between Wolverine, Jean Grey, and Cyclops will heat up... **'ROCK'-Y, THE ANIMATED HERO:** *Variety* reports that Warner Bros. has acquired the film rights to the Cartoon Network animated show *Johnny Bravo*, in hopes of turning the film into a starring vehicle for WWE

wrestler The Rock. The trade reports that the Johnny Bravo "is about a big-muscled, big-haired sweet-talking ladies man who sounds like Elvis, loves his mother and worships himself—and continually proves to be his own worst enemy"... **SCREAM TEAM IS CURSED:** Director Wes Craven and screenwriter Kevin Williamson of *Scream* fame will reunite to work together on

Jason X

new line
rated r



movie ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
dvd ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Scooby Doo

warner bros.
rated pg



series ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
dvd ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

To quote a line from *Jason X* directly, "What, are you high!?" I imagine that this particular line was taken somewhere from a conversation that the producers had with the writer. But they eventually came to the conclusion of "Aw, what the hell? We can profit no matter how low our quality standards are, because it'll not only have the name 'Jason' in the title, but also the letter 'X.'" Fuzzy logic at best. I've seen better acting in porn movies. Come to think of it, I've seen better stories in porn movies. And at least in those, the sex was real. To watch this movie is to see every member of a massive spaceship's crew die one by one in predictable, non-frightening fashion; it is to hear yourself crying "Please, just end!" every time someone is slashed to tiny bits or as another plot twist is thrown in as if they were a freebie given away at the register if you buy this DVD; and it is to waste nearly two hours of your implicitly valuable life that you'll desperately want back. At least with some low-end horror movies they're so bad that they're funny. *Jason X* holds no such value—or any value at all.

VALUE: Don't be fooled by the "hidden" button on the menu that almost mockingly sends you to a list of the credits: The only worth that this movie has is that, here in America, no one forces you to buy it.

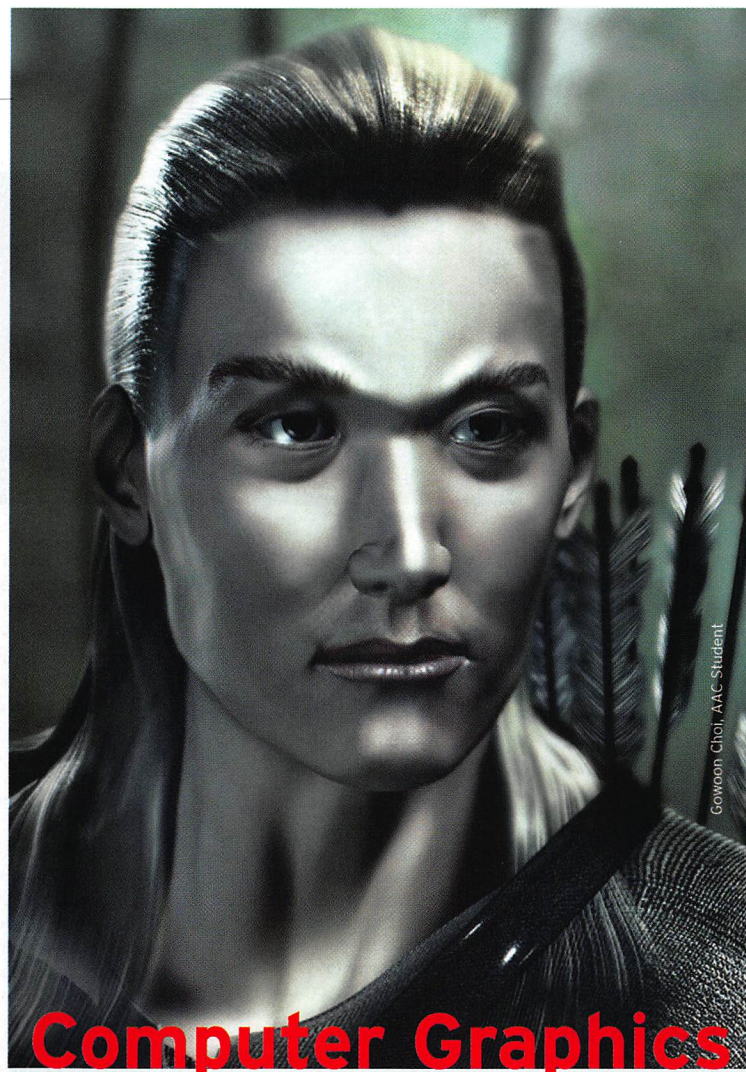
Nick Hurwitch

The riddle of the month: Who was this live-action *Scooby Doo* actually made for? Because, even in just the first few minutes, it's apparent that there lurks a darker, edgier *Scooby* behind this mild, toned-down PG version—one that could have easily achieved a controversial PG-13 rating. Instead, many of the scenes where you wish the filmmakers pushed the envelope end in utter disappointment (Velma's sexuality, Shaggy and Scooby's constant munchies, and many more trademark *Doo* conspiracy theories are never given proper spotlight). Just like the cartoon, there just isn't much to laugh about. Matthew Lillard, however, deserves major props for his pitch-on performance as Shaggy; and for that matter, the rest of the cast (Sarah Michelle Gellar, Freddie Prinze Jr. and Linda Cardellini) are quite excellent, too. But this mystery—plotted around the haunted happenings on Spooky Island—ultimately can't be saved by the actors since there really wasn't much to this gang to begin with (except for bad animation).

VALUE: Director Raja Gosnell's commentary offers some cool CG tidbits for techno geeks, but for such a effects-laden production, a more in-depth documentary would have been nice; ultimately, "fans" get nothing but run of the mill extras.

SCOOPY'S TAKE: Rell-roo, ray readers. Ris Re-Ve-Re rucks.

Jon M Gibson



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Cursed, a new horror/thriller from Dimension Films. Set in Los Angeles, the film is a modern, hip twist on the classic werewolf tale. Production will begin in L.A. immediately with the film's release slated for wide release on August 8, 2003. . . . **JOLIE GETS BITTEN:** *Variety* reports that Warner Bros. has picked up the film rights to the Kelley Armstrong novel *Bitten*, with Angelina Jolie (*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*) attached to star. The film is about "a woman who turns into a werewolf after she gets bitten and lives among a clandestine wolf pack in Canada. She finally decides to suppress her animalistic tendencies

Band of Brothers

hbo
rated nr



movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

Goosebumps. That's what you'll get when you watch *Band of Brothers*. An HBO miniseries now artfully collected DVD (packed in a cool steel tin), it tells the story of Easy Company, the 506th Regiment of the US Army's 101st Airborne Division during World War II, from the different perspectives of several of the troops. You'll get to experience everything from training camp (1942) and Operation Market Garden to the Battle of the Bulge, and finally a conclusion at Hitler's mountaintop fortress in Berchtesgaden (1945). Spanning six discs (10 hour-long episodes), *Band of Brothers* is a visual masterpiece. The footage is so convincing, you would swear it's real. From the incredible fire fights in the trenches to the volatile battles on the frontlines, this is war from the soldier's point-of-view, and, at times, is as disturbing as it is mesmerizing. Although the overall cast isn't A-list, the performances are first rate, especially Damian Lewis (who portrays Captain Winters) and Ron Livingston (playing Lewis Nixon).

VALUE: For an HBO DVD, it's packed with some outstanding features. In addition to a hefty "making of" featurette, the coolest bonus feature was Livingston's "Personal Video Diaries." Here, the footage the actor shot on digital video camera each day during filming can be glimpsed for the first time; from boot camp to horsing around on the set, the clips are not only fun to watch, but emotional as well.

Tom Ham

Brotherhood of the Wolf

universal
rated r



series ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

In *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (Le Pacte des Loups in France), director Christophe Gans has crafted something of a whirlwind movie; basically, that boils down to adequate screen time for nearly every genre of film-making—mutilated Brothers' Grimm fairy tale, hellish monster riff, atmospheric period piece, intense drama, sensual era romance, conspiracy thriller, and hard-slicing martial arts epic. But the overlying plot that propels all these elements is naturalist Sir Gregoire de Fronsac's scavenger hunt for a ominous beast that's been pillaging the French countryside for years; along with his bone-crunching Indian companion (Mark Dacascos from TV's *The Crow*), the duo track the monster. Clocking in at 150 minutes, *Brotherhood* is quite languid in pace—considering it dips into all the aforementioned facets several times over—but it's really tough to lose interest. Progressive segments, gradually revealing more of the blood-thirsty creature, are spliced strategically between the more lethargic bits; and once you finally see the twisted beast in all its glory, your fascination with the film will merely double. Hell, with Gans' apt editing mix, filled with slo-mo action and stylish cinematography—in perfect form in a 1700's setting—you should be hooked from the first shot.

VALUE: The deleted scenes are far from integral, and the trailer is worthless. A "special edition" is due for this film.

Jon M Gibson

Ice Age

20th century fox
rated pg



movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

Trying to cash in on the computer animated children's-but-also-for-adults movie craze that DreamWorks and Pixar have graced us with in recent years, Fox puts in its bid with *Ice Age*. With all the fine predecessors, you would think that the studio would have had a leg up on the competition. Instead, *Ice Age* seems confused in style and substance. The visuals sometimes look like a stylish cartoon and other times are ultra detailed, as if trying to remind us that we are indeed still watching computer animation. Plus, the humor never reaches beyond the realm of juvenile, other than the fact that Sid the sloth could very well be under homo-suspicion; and Ray Romano's talent is squandered on a generally unhappy mammoth. You'll miss the "adults only" chuckles that came out of *Toy Story* and *Shrek*, whose absence in *Ice Age* were nowhere near compensated for in its forced attempts for hilarity and subtle, under-developed sentiments.

VALUE: Often times, especially when involving the ill-fated Scrat the squirrel, *Ice Age* plays out like a string of animated shorts. It is appropriate, then, that the special features disc contains some true animated snippets. But way more goes into the production of a CG film than the disc lets on; Disney crafted a much better archive with their two-disc *Monster's Inc.* set.

Nick Hurwitch

FoTR: Extended Ed.

new line cinema
rated pg-13



series ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

With the release of the *Two Towers* just weeks away, Peter Jackson and company want you to venture into Middle Earth one more time. You knew it was coming and it's finally here—cue choir and symphony—*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring - Special Extended Edition*. With over thirty minutes of extra footage (for a total running time of 208 minutes) and, get this, over six hours of bonus materials, this is the version you want to get. The extended scenes are truly for the fans of the books. Not only do they expand on some key moments in the story, but they also make the film feel more cohesive and complete. The further telling of the love story between Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) and Arwen (Liv Tyler) was a really nice touch and hearing Gandalf (Ian McKellen) recite the Dark Speech of Mordor was just too cool for words. Well done, Mr. Jackson. Well done indeed.

VALUE: Unbelievable. *The Extended Edition* is packed with quality extras, starting with four outstanding commentaries, including a very informative track by the cast (especially Christopher Lee); and a "visual effects" chapter (composed of 3 featurettes) shows how they created the cave troll sequence using VR technology. When you put all of this together with a new DTS ES 6.1 sound mix, kiss your weekend goodbye.

Tom Ham

True Romance

warner bros.
RATED R



movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

Quentin Tarantino's first script in full motion-picture glory is far more disturbing than the name could ever suggest. Pimps, hookers, drugs, guns, violence—oh, the violence (I'll even admit that I had to shield my eyes briefly for a few scenes); and yet, it's all so romantic. The film is beautifully acted by a roster of notables—Brad Pitt, Christopher Walkin, Dennis Hopper, Gary Oldman, Samuel L. Jackson, Val Kilmer... and that's only some of the supporting cast. Christian Slater and Patricia Arquette headline the show as Clarence and Alabama, our wonderfully disillusioned, undoubtedly disturbed, and hopelessly in-love stars. Tarantino's yarn jerks the audience with bursts of sadism coupled with tenderness. Each character flows into Clarence and Alabama's world—captivatingly impactful—and then flows out again, all but forgotten; it's a testament to *True Romance*'s wonderful acting. This is surely one of the most deranged views of romance in all of film.

VALUE: Three commentaries, director Tony Scott's on-set storyboards, and short commentaries from some of the supporting cast are the most interesting features; plus, the deleted and behind-the-scenes footage is more refined and complete than most DVDs. Also, an alternate ending—nearly finished—shows us what the movie almost was.

Nick Hurwitch

for a normal human life, becomes a journalist and falls in love. She is drawn back to her pack, though, when a rogue band of werewolves begins drafting criminals into its pack" . . . **MATRIX REPLAYED:** Maverick Records, the label that will be putting out the official soundtrack for *The Matrix: Reloaded*, reveals that Linkin Park, Prodigy, Deftones, and Zack de la Rocha of Rage Against the Machine are some of the musical personalities that will be

contributing to the film's official soundtrack . . . **DIE HARD WITH AN OLD MAN'S CANE:** After years and years and years of gossip, *The Hollywood Reporter* announced that *Die Hard 4* officially in the works. While Bruce Willis has previously denied his interest in doing *DH4*, the trade reports that Willis and Arnold Rifkin's Cheyenne Enterprises are near a deal with 20th Century Fox to bring yet another installment of the *Die Hard* franchise to the

big screen, studio sources confirmed . . . **RESIDENT EVIL SEQUEL:** *Variety* reports that Paul W.S. Anderson is writing and producing the *Resident Evil* sequel, tentatively titled *Resident Evil: Nemesis*. Right now, it is unknown whether or not he will direct. The sequel will bring back cast members Milla Jovovich and Eric Mabius . . . **For more filmic newsbytes, log onto www.cinemaconfidential.com** . . .

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interview **barry sonnenfeld**

PAINT IT BLACK

words jon m gibson

Critically, *Men in Black* is considered a joke—but that's exactly what it is. While it doesn't succeed on the same plane as some of director **Barry Sonnenfeld**'s earlier films, like *The Addams Family* and *Get Shorty*, the *MIB* franchise is still a perfect example of his excellent comedic pace. Throughout all of his movies, he balances the cool with the weird (aliens with slick secret agents in *MIB*; Hollywood with gangsters in *Shorty*). And he'll be tackling that once again in his next film, based on the morbidly tangled children's book, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, by Lemony Snicket. But he took a break from pre-production to chat about porn, his clash with Fox, and, above all things, Michael Jackson's lifelong dream.

You've had a colorful career in the adult entertainment industry, so do you ever find yourself applying the knowledge you gained from the hardcore porn biz to your Hollywood flicks?

Nah, not really. It was just a way to pay for my camera that I had just bought. But there's not much really to chat about on that really. [He mumbles, eager to change the subject.]

Okay, when you were on Letterman, you said, somewhat jokingly, that you can't believe studios put you in charge of such gigantic blockbusters. So do you find yourself filled with nervous energy while you're working on high-profile movies like *Men in Black*?

Yeah, I find that directing is hard, because it's both trying to be commercial and artistic; and you wanna make as good a movie as you can, and as artistic and as interesting a movie, but you also feel a tremendous pressure and responsibility because the reason the studio has given you all this money is so that you can earn money for them. So you're both the creative guy, but you also feel a little bit like you're the financial executive as well. So it's a very difficult line to walk.

But no matter what kind of movie you make—whether it's a low-budget independent feature or \$100-million-plus blockbuster—your trademark, offbeat comedic pulse is always present.

It's just what I'm attracted to, so it's the nature of the

movies I've directed because of me getting to choose what I want to direct. And as a cinematographer, again you have the choice of which movies you choose to shoot. So, it's what attracts me—it's what I find interesting in life—so it's what I end up working on, whether it's as a cinematographer or as a director.

"I loved *The Tick*. I thought in many ways it was one of the best things I've done. Fox never understood what what it was..."

—Barry Sonnenfeld, director

Okay, you've got to tell me the Michael Jackson story.

Yeah, Sony had a new Michael Jackson album coming out and wanted me to see if there was a place to put him in the movie and I couldn't think of any. Michael Jackson and I had a conversation and he was very ambitious at first. He told me he wanted to be in many scenes and he told me he wanted to be important to the plot, but this all

happened very late in the shooting. We were about 14 or 15 weeks into the show when this all happened. And so I said, "Look, you know, I can't help you. We're almost done. There are no more parts..." and all this stuff and he said, "Well, look, you know I've always dreamed about being in *Men in Black*. What I really want to do is wear the suit." And immediately I thought of a way I could put Michael Jackson in the movie, in a funny role, where he could wear the suit. So that's what ended up happening.

Didn't he go as far as wanting his mug on the poster, too?

Oh, he asked if he could be on the poster and I explained to him that contractually that was a Tommy and Will thing. So I told him, "Good luck to you on that one."

Lastly, I must say, it was sad to see *The Tick* get cancelled.

I loved *The Tick*. I thought in many ways it was one of the best things I've done. I felt that Fox never understood what they had or what it was, and they were interested in it initially for the wrong reasons. It's unfortunate and we should have taken the show to The WB; we were offered less money, but they knew *The Tick* and loved *The Tick* and wanted *The Tick* and that's where we should have been. It was a mistake not to be at The WB. I think it still would have been on the air. **play**

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STILL 'SLINGIN'

words jon m gibson

interview sam raimi • laura ziskin

When it opened earlier this year, *Spider-Man* surpassed the expectations of nearly everyone—comic book geeks, snooty critics, and even box-office analysts. That said, it rightfully earned its “summer blockbuster” status. Now with the DVD hogging shelf space at retailers everywhere—complete with a hefty, web-slinger archive on a second disc—we tapped director **Sam Raimi** and producer **Laura Ziskin** for some afterthoughts, gossip on the sequel, and even some fashion advice.

Alright, Sam, I have a very important question for you. Can I have Ted's autograph?
Joxer Rocks!

Sam Raimi: [Laughs] That's funny.

Seriously, though, with *Spider-Man* in the can—a considerable blockbuster—what's running through your head right now?

Sam: I'm wondering what's for lunch [laughs]. What comes to mind are if Laura and I and our great writer, Michael Chabon, and Avi Arad, our partner, can come up with a great, great *Spider-Man 2* story that takes the character on a continuation of his journey to becoming a responsible young man. We really want to make something that is better than the first. And we see that people really seemed to like the first picture and we're thrilled at that. We feel a tremendous sense of expectation upon us and we really want to deliver. So those are the thoughts that are running through my mind right now.

What about you, Laura?

Laura Ziskin: Well, you know, it was interesting that you said some time has passed. I don't think it's [been like that] for poor Sam, who actually finished the movie, delivered the movie, released the movie, went on the road to promote the movie internationally, came back and started the sequel. So I feel for him... [Laughs]

There really hasn't been a break in-between, has there?

Laura: It would be nice to say how we've had time to reflect, but in a certain sense we haven't. We're just back into it. We've all worked hard—Sam, in particular, on the DVD—and now the sequel. So it's sort of like this is our life. There isn't room for other thoughts.

In that sense then, do you hope that the cycle continues? That *Spider-Man 3* and *Spider-Man 4* just completely consume your life like that—because, essentially, that's the ultimate sign of success?

Laura: I think right now we're focused, because it's really about making this next movie and making it a thing onto itself, so that it is its own unique thing, obviously inspired by the first one and using a lot of what we've learned and fulfilling the expectations that we've now created with the first one. But also, for all of us, I think [it's important] to stay interested and engaged in the actors. We now have to make it its own unique thing. And I think we're just focused on that and not really thinking beyond that.

Sam, is there anything that you would change or improve upon now that the movie is done and you've had about six months since it initially hit theaters?

Sam: Oh, yeah, well I think we would change everything [laughs]. I mean, the more time you have in the shop, the better you can make it. And that's especially true in the digital



world. It literally is like a word processor and it's like writing a first draft of an article, and then being able to come back to it the next day and improving it, and improving it, and improving it until they pry the negative from your hands, you know? So every shot you see you'd like to be able to go back and spend some more time with.

So you were definitely restricted by time with this movie? Oftentimes, it seems like there is so much pressure applied to productions—especially on the scale of *Spider-Man*—that sometimes you have no choice but to just let go of a film that you really don't want to show to an audience.

Laura: Well, I think Sam's right. Moviemaking is that kind of process where you always need more time. And we did have a release date and we were literally working up until the very last second. And I always like to tell the story of the final shot in the movie. I know when I came onto the movie—and I came on after Sam—it was in the works and it was the very last thing that was dropped into the picture on the day we finished the dub. So it really is very, very time consuming and sometimes you are forced to say something is good enough when you wish you had a few more months to refine it.

It seems, in general, that special effects were where a majority of the time was focused.

Sam: And in working on the script. We had great writing done by Alvin Sargent. He did a number of polishes on David Koepp's work. I wish I could have given both writers a little more time. They were both doing great work. But we would say to Alvin, "Rewrite this by tomorrow" [laughs]. He did a great job, but I would have rather given him a week [laughs]. Everyone really delivered on our team. Sometimes I think that we could have done a better job, like any filmmakers, if we had a little more time.

Laura: That said, I'm a believer that sometimes limitations force you to be more creative. So sometimes when you say, "God, we have to do this quick" or, "we don't have as much money as we want," you end up finding a better way and that's really one of the exciting, fun and challenging things about filmmaking.

That is so very true, in any industry. What would you say is one example from *Spider-Man* where that was the case?

Laura: There were certain things we wanted to do in New York, but we were limited financially from being able to shoot as much in New York as we wanted to. We found a way to do some things—I'm not going to tell you what, because I don't want to give away the magic—on a back lot, and actually, they are some of the best scenes in the movie. You're prepping and thinking, "Oh my god, we have to have this location, we have to do this in New York," and then you can't and then you end up, in a sense, thinking you're making due, and it ends up actually being great. So that happens. Sometimes it's in casting, where you think, "Oh, I have to have one person," and then you don't get that person, but you end up getting somebody better. I think that happens a lot.

Additional pressure comes from fans, who can get quite livid about a property like *Spider-Man*. So approximately how much hate mail did you get about Spidey's organic web-shooters, because that was a big thing on message boards.

Laura: Before the movie was released. After the release of the movie, it was not even an issue, really. It just went away.

Sam: Yeah, exactly. I think there was a lot of outcry during the making of, but I think those were people that just loved *Spider-Man* and they wanted us to be true to the character. And I think that once the decision was made that we weren't gonna make that change, that they logically halted their cry.

It worked out well, though. But on that note, this seems like the first movie you've worked on where people were just completely focused on every aspect on the "making of" process. Generally, the media and fans don't get involved until after the film has wrapped and you've got a final print in your hands. With *Spider-Man*, you had people sneaking onto the set and calling the studio non-stop.

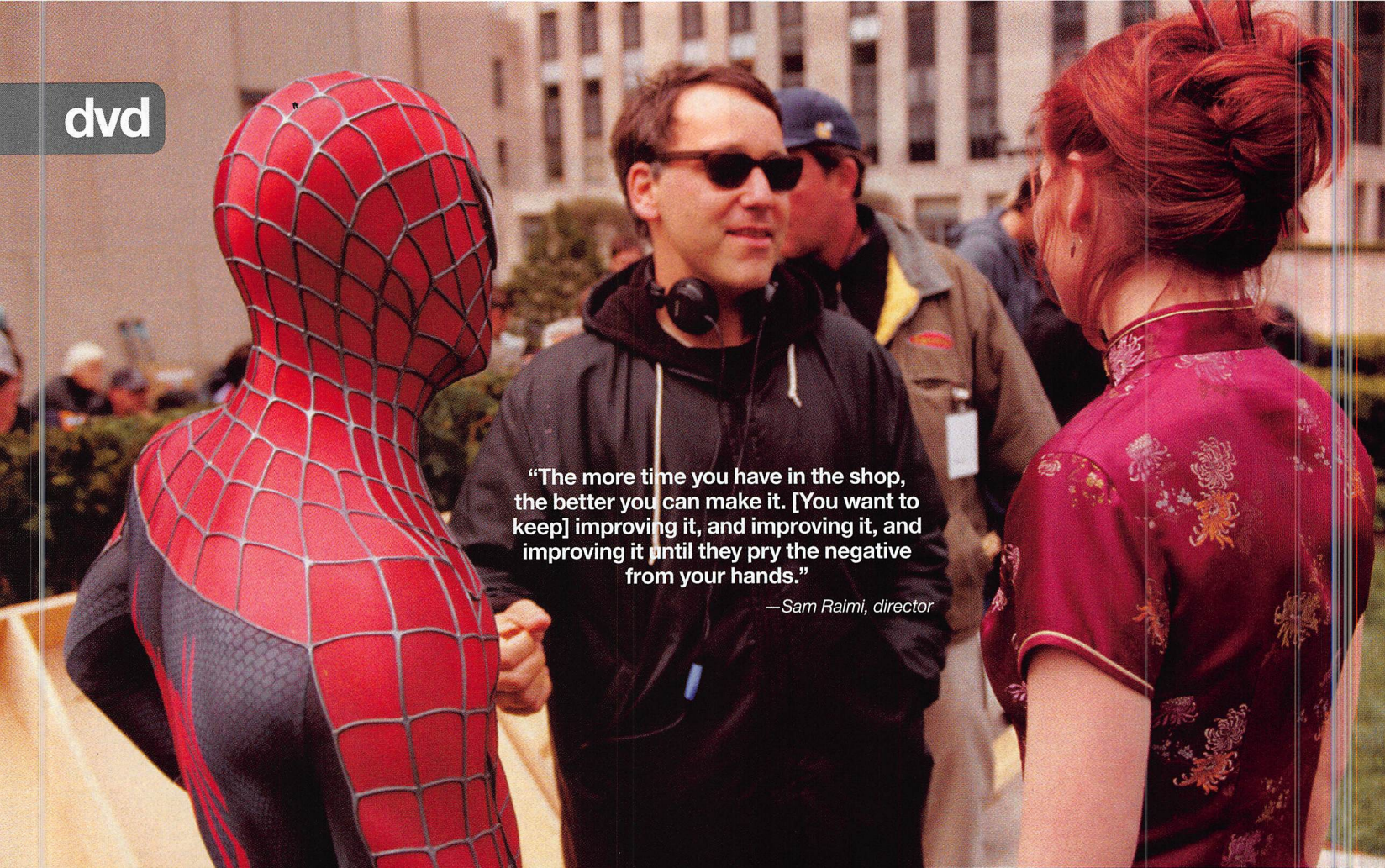
Sam: That's so true. Decisions that we would discuss in the production office, we would find kids discussing on the internet the following night. And we never encountered such participation in the making of a picture with the fans as on this film. I think that goes for Laura, too.

Laura: Yeah, it was really astonishing. I'd never seen anything like it. Now we're aware of it and we warn people when they get involved with the movie that there's this incredible, voracious appetite for information.

Does that make it more stressful or does that just make it more rewarding for what you are doing?

Laura: In the early days, we would read what was written on the internet every day, but at the end of the day you have to trust your own instincts and make the decisions that you think are best. So we're the ones who are in the process and there are always going to be rumors and people are always going to have their opinion. We have to just make the movie and then put it out there and let that be judged.

Sam, over the past few years, you've been dabbling in different genres besides the fantasy/comic books realm—like drama, romantic comedy, thriller. What compelled you to experiment so much with your resume?



"The more time you have in the shop, the better you can make it. [You want to keep] improving it, and improving it, and improving it until they pry the negative from your hands."

—Sam Raimi, director

Sam: That's what I felt that I've always tried to do: to do something new. Whether it's a horror film and an experiment with lighting and sound design, and a dramatic creation of a world which we're not privy to, you know, the world of the supernatural. Or whether it's pushing myself to learn how to tell a story with an actor and a script without the camera—trying to remain invisible like I tried to do in *A Simple Plan*. I'm always trying to do something different. In *Spider-Man*, it was adapting a character that I had loved for 40 years and trying to realize those things that I loved about Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's creation on the big screen—about attempting a translation process and bringing together talent which I had learned previously, but had only applied separately. Like, I had learned a lot about camera and camera movement from working on a number of horror films. And I had learned a lot from actors that I had worked with and writers on the more dramatic pictures I've made. And this was a chance to bring both of those disciplines together. So that was new for me.

Even while you're directing Kevin Costner on the big screen, you still continue to reinforce your ever-present fantasy backbone on TV with *Hercules* and other producing efforts. So what attracts you to the fantastical, because you've always had that trait, even before *The Evil Dead*.

Sam: Well, *Hercules* and *Xena* are more my partner Robert Tapert and his efforts in television. I helped him a little bit, but he really deserves the credit for that, or the blame. [Laughs]

Well, obviously it's still a pet genre of yours.

Sam: Yes, I like fantasy. I like a good fantasy film. It's something that film can do in a unique, fantastic way.

Laura: He's very in touch with his inner child [laughs]. That's my experience with Sam. He's very in touch, in the best possible way, with the child in him and, of course, that fantasy appeals to that side in all of us.

So you like pretending, huh?

Sam: Yeah. Everyone involved in filmmaking and storytelling and story-watching must like pretending.

Is that why you offered to play a Fred look-alike in the live-action update of *The Flintstones*?

Sam: [Laughs] I was cut out of *The Flintstones*. I knew that was going to happen, too. When I was being directed by Brian Levant, they were doing a scene that was a recreation

of a crime that Fred Flintstone supposedly committed and I was the actor in the recreation playing Fred. And I say to Brian, "Now how are you going to use this in the movie, just so I know?" And he says, "Oh, well, it's just a shot for when Elizabeth Taylor, who plays Fred's mom, is watching TV." I'm thinking to myself, "If I'm the editor, am I gonna show Elizabeth Taylor's face or am I gonna show me playing Fred Flintstone on TV?" [Laughs]

Laura: I gotta see this. Were you wearing the caveman outfit and everything?

Sam: Yeah, I wore the outfit [laughs]. But it's been edited out of the picture.

Another interesting tidbit: You wear a suit on the set of all your movies. How on Earth can you stand the humidity of a New York summer in wool?

Sam: It's awful, isn't it? I need to get a lighter fabric suit [laughs].

Laura: If you print that, people will send you suits. That will be good.

You'll get free suits out of this article, but I won't. That's not a fair trade. But seriously, what do you think that lends to the production? Is it just a habit you picked up early on?

Sam: My father told me that a man's dress is a sign of the respect he has for others, given any particular social situation. So, if you go to your church or your synagogue—or what have you—you probably are going to end up wearing a suit or a tie. Or if you are in a meeting where you want to impress people, you'll probably wear a suit and a tie—not impress, but if you want to leave a positive impression, I guess to say that you are serious about your work or this meeting is important to you, that you hold them in a certain regard worthy of dressing up for. So I think it's the same reason people wear suits everywhere else. I have a respect for the cast and crew and it's a symbol of that respect that I have for those who I am working with.

Finally, since you've both worked with Stan "The Man" Lee, have you invented a catch phrase of your own to close out this interview with?

Laura: Go ahead, Sam.

Sam: Oh, gosh. [Long Pause]

The pressure is on...

Laura: We're gonna have to work on that for *Spider-Man 2*.

Okay, you can just borrow one from Stan.

Sam: Oh, I like when he says "Excelsior!" play

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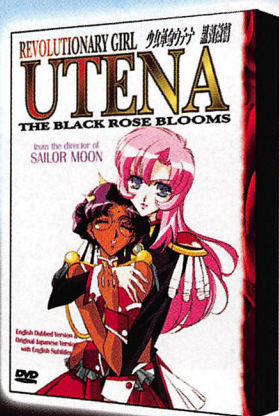
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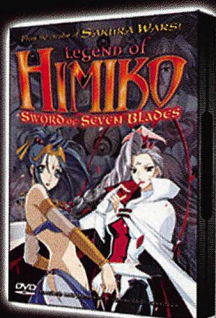
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interview seth kearsley

DRAWING SANDLER

words jon m gibson

American animation, for the most part, has been dominated by big-budget studio projects—the *Lion Kings*, *Little Mermaids*, and *Aladdins* of the world, to name a few. But with Adam Sandler's *8 Crazy Nights*, audiences will get a not-so-wholesome dose of animated wisdom. While it doesn't wander into the realm of gratuitous full-frontal shots and cartoon sex, the movie does make a statement about where animation should be heading. Sure, no one can argue that it's an Adam Sandler movie that just happens to be animated; but *8 Crazy Nights* is also a marker for things to come, proclaiming that cartoons can be about a lot more than a goofy sidekick and family-friendly songs. Director **Seth Kearsley**—whose skills have been previously applied to *The Simpsons*, *The Maxx*, and *Dilbert*—tells us why.

"I hope that it means that more people will want to do animated movies that aren't 90-minute babysitters."

—Seth Kearsley, director

An animated Adam Sandler movie? Indulge me.

Seth Kearsley: [Adam and crew] were mixing *Sam and Judy's Kid* album and *Big Daddy* at the same time, and they brought Amy Pascal [Chairman of Columbia Pictures] in to listen to a *Big Daddy* mix and the Whitey skit from the album. And she asked what they were gonna do with it, and they said, "We're thinking about doing an animated movie." She said she'd buy it. So while they were shooting *Little Nicky*, they had a separate writing trailer for *8 Crazy Nights*.

How about your origin story? You started in animation working on MTV's *The Maxx*, right?

I did layout and storyboards, and we did a little bit of animation here in LA. I got to do a little bit of everything. Most of the crew was straight out of school; it was all our first jobs in animation. That was another one of those jobs that you don't realize how good you had it until you move on. When the first episode aired, that following Friday was our last day [laughs]. So we'd go out and look for jobs, but nobody knew about the show. *The Mask*—the animated series from *The Mask*, the movie—was in pro-

duction at that time, so every time you went in and someone asked what you were working on, you'd say, "*The Maxx*," and they'd always say, "Oh, *The Mask*." "No, *The Maxx*—it's on MTV."

Sounds tough. The ups and downs of primetime animation are so turbulent—much of which the average Joe just doesn't notice. You also hit a rough spot with *Dilbert* on UPN, too.

Our second season was the first season of the WWF on UPN, and a smart comedy about office life doesn't quite fit in with the wrestling crowd. And they put us in-between *Shasta McNasty* and *The Strip*. For the premiere episode of the first season, they put billboards up all over LA, and the only advertisement for the second season was in a 30-second radio spot, they do 13-and-a-half minutes on *Shasta McNasty* and then they say, "...and after the season premiere of *Dilbert*, stay tuned for..." That was all the advertising for our "big" season premiere. That was done at Sony were I first heard about *8 Crazy Nights*.

***8 Crazy Nights*, without pinning down an exact number,**

cost approximately one-sixth of a typical Disney animated movie—price tags that are often much higher than the gross national product of small countries.

What do you think that says about the state of animation and how much money is simply wasted?

I'm a big fan of anime movies and Miyazaki, in particular, and those are all much lower budget than what we do. And it's not just because it's cheaper to do overseas, but because Miyazaki does the whole storyboard for the movie, then he's the final approval in every department all along the way—there's very little waste. It's much more of a filmmaker thing than a studio project. I hope that it means that more people will want to do animated movies that aren't 90-minute babysitters. Animation has been stuck in this musical fairy tale land of studio-day's filmmaking; it'd be nice to move onto more filmmaker filmmaking where you have more personal films. This is a very personal film. There's a lot of stuff in there that's only there because it's something Adam felt needed to be there or something that I felt needed to be there. There's nothing there that's dictated to us by marketing or another division of the studio. **play**

ZONE OF THE ENDERS Z.O.E.

DOLORES, i

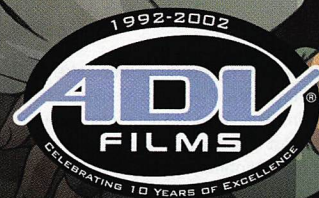
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SOLAR SURFING

words jon m gibson

Forget about all the techno babble sci-fi movies that keep getting churned out of Tinseltown. There is no metallic-coated, fusion-driven future awaiting us; it's all about pirates, buried treasure, and aliens. At least that's the vision behind *Treasure Planet*, an update on Robert Louis Stevenson's age-old tale of sailing the high seas, swashbuckling, and deception. The movie is also a considerable landmark for Disney, setting the pace for things to come from the studio; not only is *Treasure Planet* absent of sing-along songs, but it's also a great technical feat, showcasing an impressive convergence of traditional and CG animation. Co-directors **Ron Clements** and **John Musker** give us an inside peek into the animation process.

Silver, the film's cook and villain, is a hybrid of hand-drawn (body) and CG animation (mechanical arm).



What prompted the futuristic take on *Treasure Island*?

Ron Clements: I've been a science fiction fan since I was a kid and I've been at Disney for about 28 years now, I think. But I've always wanted to do something in the science fiction/fantasy genre. Because of all the nautical themes in *Treasure Island*—and all the great characters and situations—it just seemed like a natural translation to turn it into a space fantasy.

Even though it's based on classic literature, it has some very fresh concepts intact.

Ron: Right. Science fiction tends to be more hardware driven and this feels just a little warmer—more fantasy than science fiction. This is the romance of the sea that I don't think has really been explored in a big scale sci-fi movie quite like the way we're doing it.

John Musker: The movie itself kind of takes place in a fantasy universe; it's not the future or the past, and there's no reference to Earth in it. It's all its own fantasy universe, and we even went so far in the movie to say that outer space is filled with atmosphere—it's called the "etherium," so you can breathe in outer space. So we have these

big, open-deck ships and the characters are not wearing space suits or anything like that. The wind is sort of blowing against them. We really wanted to keep the romance of the Stevenson story.

Even from the trailer—when you see the spaceport for the first time—it's apparent that this movie has an amazing amount of detail in it; everything is always moving all the time. That has to be an enormous challenge?

John: It was a very challenging thing, and also because



"We have these big, open-deck ships and the characters are not wearing space suits or anything like that. We really wanted to keep the romance of the Stevenson story."

—John Musker, director

we are creating a whole universe from scratch within the movie. I think we were always, from the beginning with this movie, going for a very classical look. In the last two films we did, *Aladdin* and *Hercules*, we were deliberately going for a more stylized look—and, in some ways, a flatter look—because *Aladdin* was based on Persian miniatures which are very linear, and *Hercules* was based on designs on Greek vases which are very flat. But this film was really based more on the Brandywine school of painting with artists like N.C. Wyatt and Howard Pyle to add a rich oil-painting look, romantic lighting, and detail to it. Also, because it's an action-adventure movie, we wanted to be able to move the camera as much as possible, particularly in the action sequences—but not *just* in the action sequences. So it's really played up. It's still a hand-drawn film in the Disney tradition, but we went for as much depth as possible within the settings and the characters. It's been fun now to see it, as we're preparing the IMAX version of this. We didn't know when we started out on this that it would be released the same day on an IMAX screen.

IMAX? That truly is an enormous challenge.

John: And we heard about it part way into the process and we went, "Uh-oh, is this going to work? We better test this out after the fact, even though they made the announcement." Fortunately, we put so much detail in the backgrounds that it held up really well on the big screen. In fact, there are a few shots, because of some computer things, where we went and sort of "rezed" up the scenes just to make sure there were no digital artifacts. It's pretty stunning to see on a six-story-high screen. You really feel immersed in the environment and you feel like it's all around you, and when we have sequences where Jim is doing this thing called "solar surfing"—where he's got

this combination wind surfer/solar surfer, moving through the canyons of his home planet—it's just like it pulls you right into the screen in the IMAX version. So it's been cool seeing that. And you see detail that you don't see on 35mm. That was there in some cases, but you didn't appreciate it; now you see them on the big screen and it's like, "Wow." There's stuff going back into the deepest space; small details that really come alive on the big, big screen.

***Treasure Planet* is also a great milestone for the convergence of CG and traditional animation.**

Ron: Yeah, this is a hybrid universe, so we've used this technique called "virtual sets." We created a computer model of the ship, 'cause it was going to appear in so much of the film. And in this film, we're able to actually re-light that boat for different sequences and we treat it, although it's a three-dimensional model, painterly, painting it like N.C. Wyatt would've—loose and brushy.

John: It's for long shots as well as close-ups that we can move around in the environment of the boat—all through the upper and lower decks.

Ron: So we thought that helped on the action-adventure front, to be able to liberate the camera and move up and down and sideways, because this movie plays on volumes and space more than it does on shapes and planes.

John: And the big challenge with that is to keep it looking like a painting, which sort of used an expanded version of a "deep canvas" technique that was used in *Tarzan*. So that even though we can move three-dimensionally through all these spaces, they still look like paintings and they still have that very painterly feel. So then the still shots look like a background painting; it doesn't look like a three-dimensional model.

The last animated movie that really strived for that hand-drawn/3D mix was *Titan A.E.*, which failed quite miserably in that department. Everything just looked so artificial.

Ron: Well, that movie played up some of the difficulties of CG. You could pretty much tell the difference.

No doubt.

Ron: And there were parts of it that were done totally digitally—some of the exterior scenes with the ships—and then a lot of it was totally flat and traditional. So the big thing, I think, that helps is the "deep canvas" technique which keeps the painterly look on everything. Even with *Beauty and the Beast*, which had the beautiful ballroom sequence, I think there was still a tendency, like when they go to that ballroom sequence, that you know there's something a little different going on.

Very true.

Ron: Right. But because this technique is used throughout the movie, it's why, I think, that it's much more integrated than we've ever been able to achieve before.

But this isn't the first time you toyed with CG. Both of you have directed a lot of Disney features, from *The Great Mouse Detective* to *Hercules*.

Ron: Yeah, there have certainly been many films, and a lot of sea change in the industry. Certainly when we began, when we did *Great Mouse Detective*, we did a sequence inside Big Ben where the mice were chasing around in the gears—we used computer animation in that. I think that was the first time in a Disney feature that any sort of computers had been in one of the hand-drawn features; and that was in the pre-*Toy Story* universe. **play**



film

Solaris
20th Century Fox
November 27

SCIENCE FRICTION

words jon m gibson

Kelvin (Clooney) and
his manifested wife,
Rheya (played by
Natascha McElhone).

"This movie is not an action film and people need to know that going in," warns producer James Cameron. "This is science fiction the way science fiction used to be back in the 50s and 60s when it was a fiction of ideas, a fiction of people. This film takes you to the farthest reaches of the universe, and what you find there is yourself. Kelvin is confronted with his own memory, a replay of the things he's gone through, his guilt, his culpability, the mistakes that he made. And he gets the opportunity to change it—or maybe not."

Cameron is referring to Dr. Chris Kelvin (George Clooney), the central player in *Solaris*, who propels that very human, very personal velocity of the script from the opening shot of the film to the very bleak end. The story fades in when Kelvin is summoned to the space station Prometheus; as he slowly walks through the metallic, cavernous hallways of the ship, it's wildly apparent that something devastating has transpired. Not only has Gibarian, the mission's commander and Kelvin's friend, committed suicide, but the two remaining crew members are leaning on the razor edge of insanity. Worse yet, Kelvin is confronted with visions of his dead wife—appearing on the Prometheus in pure form, even though her suicide is years past.

"The theme of predestination is crucial," explains director Steven Soderbergh, who adds "sci-fi auteur" to his resume with *Solaris* (a hybrid interpretation of the original novel by Stanislaw Lem and the 1972 Russian film by Andrei Tarkovsky). "Kelvin and Rheya's relation-

ship had ended very badly. When she appears on the Prometheus, they both struggle with the idea of the relationship traveling the same path it did before. Those issues of memory, guilt, potential redemption and the opportunity to do something again and maybe do it differently, appealed to me. As one character says at a certain point in the film, 'There are no answers, only choices.' And it really does come down to that."

What is ultimately behind the plight of everyone on the Prometheus, though, is the very planet that they were studying: Solaris. The enormous celestial body is, in fact, an infinitely evolved living organism that is manifesting and manipulating the memories of the crew. Kelvin's duty: escape the monsters in his own mind and conquer an opponent that's over a billion times his size.

Even without epic X-Wing battles, Soderbergh—a chameleon of the cinema world, with each of his films utterly diverse (*Ocean's Eleven*, *Traffic*, *The Limey*)—promises a psychological roller coaster ride geared to the greatest G.

Clooney says it best: "No one in this story has answers; they just have really good, smart questions." **play**

"This is science fiction the way science fiction used to be back in the 50s and 60s..."

—James Cameron, producer



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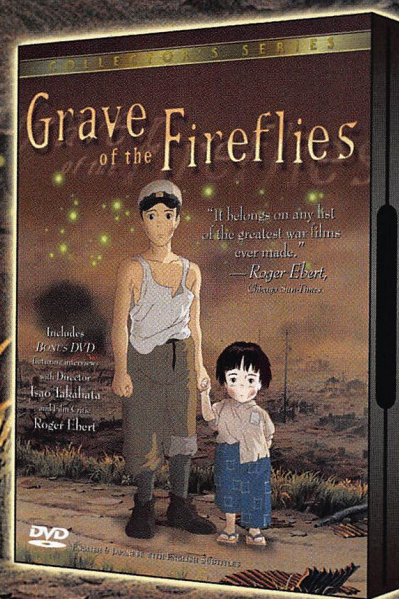
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BONDS HAVE MORE FUN

words: jon m gibson

James Bond is in hell, bloodied and bruised. Hanging onto only a few threads of life, he's left for dead. And that's where our story begins.

"Bond is trying to redeem himself," explains Pierce Brosnan of *Die Another Day*, the 20th movie in the 40-year Bond legacy. "He is trying to get back into the game. He has been stripped of his credentials as a double-O agent and is outside the pack. But they can't take away the gadgets now because they are an essential part of [the films], as are the explosions and the big set pieces. And that's the game."

But the franchise, a proven worldwide success, has a rigid rule set. Bond is, no matter the situation, always going to be Bond; *Die Another Day* doesn't defy that. "I don't feel restrained or intimidated by the enormity of a Bond film," director Lee Tamahori assures. "I knew what I was getting into and I was under no illusions. A Bond movie falls into a specific genre and you have to provide certain elements within it. You must respect the fact that it is essentially about girls, guns, gadgets and big action. They are the essential Bond ingredients. Once you've got those in place you can do a lot of things within it. No matter how much you mix this pot up for the different age groups, it still comes back to these

same crowd-pleasing ingredients."

Yet, this Bond picture does shake up the formula more than ever before. While half the movie takes place outside M16 operating boundaries, there is also weighty moments of betrayal and double-crossing. Couple those 21st updates with the expected epic-scale stunts also bound into the film—high-speed hovercrafts careening in Korea, luxury cars grinding bumpers on a frozen, glacial pond—and it's easy to see that Bond is back in a very big way.

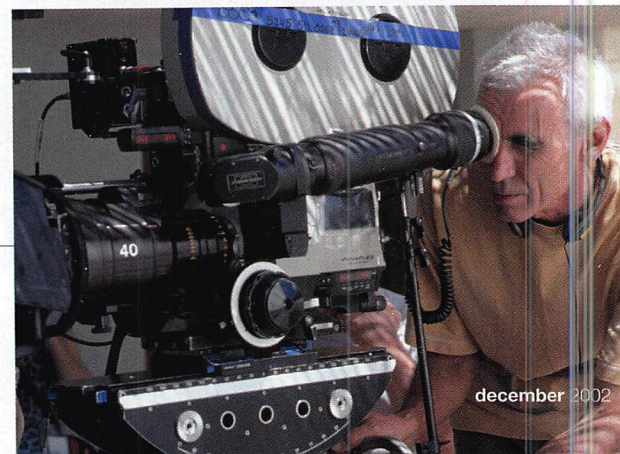
"When I first walked onto the set of *Golden-Eye*, there was a certain amount of trepidation," Brosnan recalls of the first time he donned that infamous tuxedo and said—smoothly and suavely—"shaken, not stirred." "I had grown up watching Bond movies and Sean Connery was the man you wanted to get into the ring with—he was the one you wanted to take the belt from. It's like no other acting job because it is so ingrained in the cinematic consciousness of people."

Ultimately, though, there's only one moment from this latest 007 outing—beyond the massive explosions and techno babble—that Brosnan remembers distinctly: "What stands out in my memory about *Die Another Day*? Halle coming out of the surf is way up there."

Well put, Mr. Bond. **play**

"You must respect the fact that it is essentially about girls, guns, gadgets and big action. They are the essential Bond ingredients."

—Lee Tamahori, director

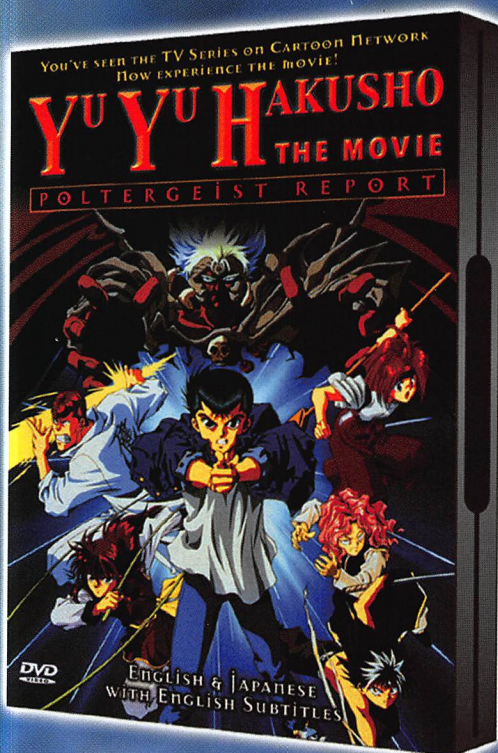


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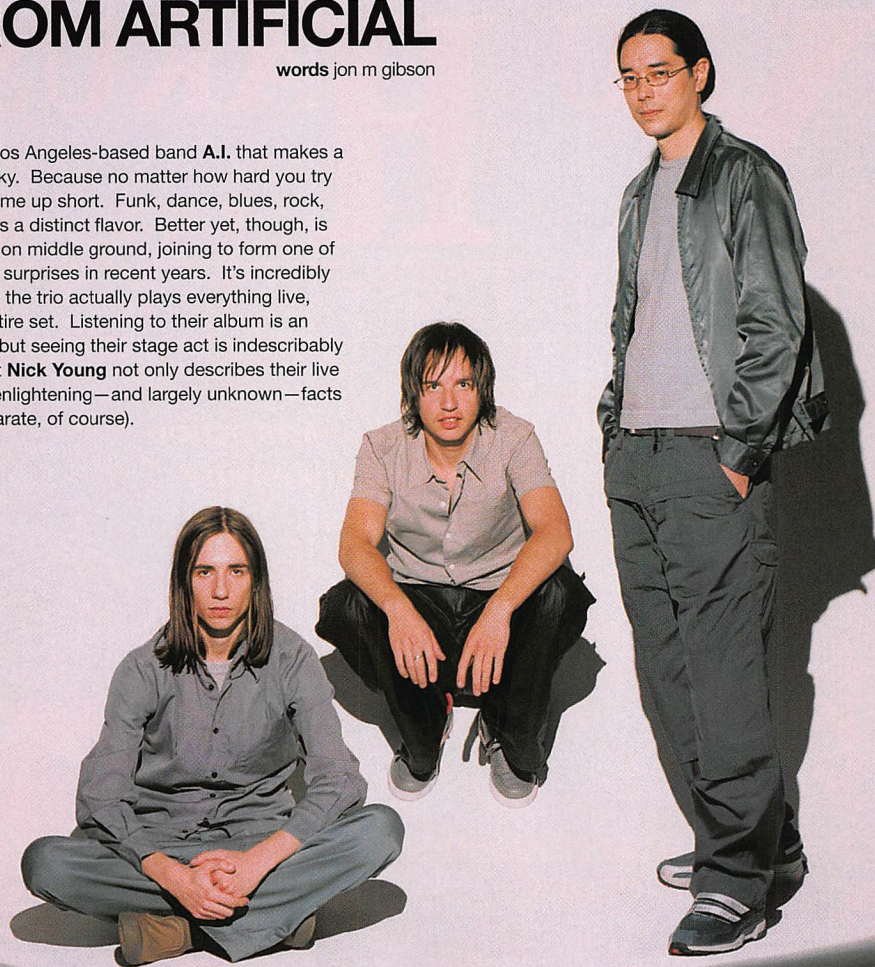
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interview **nick young**

FAR FROM ARTIFICIAL

words jon m gibson

There's a perplexing trait about Los Angeles-based band **A.I.** that makes a journalist's job excruciatingly tricky. Because no matter how hard you try to categorize their sound, you come up short. Funk, dance, blues, rock, jazz, techno, rap—every track has a distinct flavor. Better yet, though, is that every song ultimately meets on middle ground, joining to form one of the music scene's most pleasant surprises in recent years. It's incredibly varied and so highly evolved that the trio actually plays everything live, multi-tasking throughout their entire set. Listening to their album is an incredibly enjoyable experience, but seeing their stage act is indescribably impressive. But vocalist/guitarist **Nick Young** not only describes their live show, he also delves into some enlightening—and largely unknown—facts about acid trips and semen (separate, of course).



"I would be completely ecstatic if somebody actually juiced on our CD." —Nick Young, vocalist/guitarist

You guys bring a lot to the table, blending so many different styles of music—yet it's all strikingly cohesive. Do you ever lose focus?

Nick Young: It's easy to go astray. A lot of our music stems from the philosophy of allowing all different kinds of influences to come into the room while we're writing. There's a song that we didn't get to put on the record that Marvin Gay could have recorded [*laughs*]. We've been really lucky that Robby Robertson and people we worked with at DreamWorks and our producer really were able to understand what we were doing with our music, 'cause a lot of people hear something that's different and they get scared. So we feel that we can go off on a lot of different directions, but we always try to come together at a certain point and create a song in the end. The most important thing is that it has our expression in it. But beyond that, you can't control it.

At first listen, a lot of folks probably say that everything laid out on each track is simply layer after layer in a music editor. But, in fact, you generate everything live, right?

Yeah, we really feel strongly about that. We came from being musicians and we got inspired by what was hap-

pening in the electronic music world—we were excited by it. A lot of stuff that I heard happening electronically, I didn't really know how that was made, and sometimes we ended up doing stuff that we thought other people were doing but we were just doing it ourselves—in terms of trying to figure out how to perform stuff, like drum and bass, or triggering stuff live. We wanted the music to be under our control. We wanted to be able to play it and not allow it to dominate the tempo or where we're going with it. It's an important way to write, too. I think when you get in front of a computer, you're using your head much more than you're using your heart or your intuition or inspiration. You end up thinking a lot more with a computer; that can hinder certain expression from emanating.

So it's just a lot of blind experimentation for A.I.?

I don't know if I'm supposed to say this, but we'd take acid [*laughs*]. We'd play these crazy instruments and stuff and just explore the possibilities.

Would you like to endorse a special brand of acid?

Yeah [*laughs*]. We weren't afraid to go off into outer space. I come from a very song writing kind of background. I feel really strongly about it being a song in the end, and I feel

like the voice adds a certain consciousness to the music that without the voice it doesn't have. At times, we do mess around with computers and come up with beats, but in the end we always have to jam it out and figure it out that way. At least for us, it can never be figured out on the computer alone.

So from where does the track "Alien Sex" stem?

These lyrics are astounding: "Have you ever dreamed of alien cream on the cover of a magazine?"

Yeah, there are times when you're making love to a woman and you don't even know if it's her leg or your leg [*laughs*]. Under the covers, your arms and legs are like tentacles and you're wrapped around somebody and hot and sweaty. You know, we wrote that song in a really hot and sweaty rehearsal room. It's like that Madonna lyric, you know when she says, "Strike a pose..." on the cover of a magazine?" But I thought it was a little cooler to think of alien juice on the cover of a magazine.

Well, that's definitely a potent image. But it better not be our magazine.

I would be completely ecstatic if somebody actually juiced on our CD. Literally [*laughs*]. **play**

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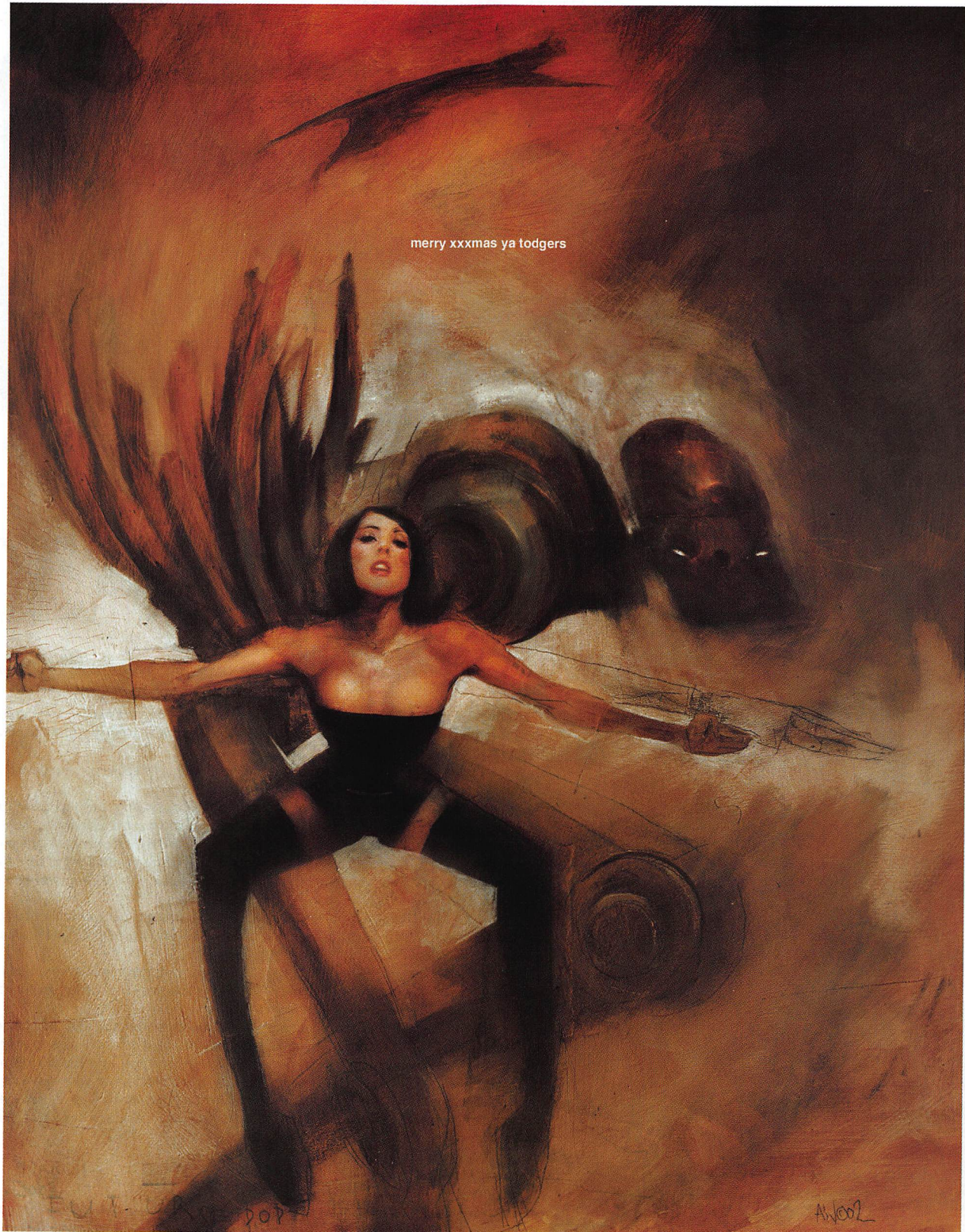


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Just in time to play Sega's awesome *House of the Dead III* on Xbox, Mad Catz' Blaster will be the only light gun for Microsoft's behemoth. Thankfully, it's a very usable design, with good trigger action and a nice D-pad right within thumb's reach. The build quality is pretty good, and it comes loaded with all the expected third-party tricks like auto-reload and burst fire modes (but we don't like to use these cheats do we?) There's also room for a memory unit in the "clip". Pity about the color, though. This is America of course, so the thing can't be a dark color, but even so, this green isn't our cup of tea. Big deal.



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This month we look for another way to play videogames that doesn't involve carrying your Xbox or PS2 into the airport with you. After all, it doesn't get any better than having the ability to play *Super Monkey Ball* from Sega while waiting in line at Starbucks.

So when is a cell phone not a cell phone? When it's an interactive gaming device, a web browser, a digital camera, and a Swiss army knife—all in one.

Sprint has been extremely aggressive in both their marketing and the growth of their cellular network, having made great strides in getting better reception and partnering with companies like Samsung to make amazingly cool devices like the SPH-A500. The phone weighs only 3.56 ounces, looks great, and has a brilliant TFT color screen. It can display eight lines of text and 4,096 colors. Even the backlight screen is great (an awesome blue color). The kicker: you can even download videogames, screensavers, and sounds (like the Bond theme).

If you use the PCS Vision plan, which starts around 10 bucks per month (in addition to your voice plan), you can get all of the extra features. Without it, you don't get the bells and whistles, so just buy a standard cell phone.

One of the coolest features is the optional digital camera, which retails for around \$70 and allows you to send an instant picture to Aunt Tilley through the internet. The quality is what you would expect from an inexpensive mini-cam, but it's fun nonetheless.

You say to want a joystick for your game playing? No problem—a special attachment is on the way. The battery life isn't bad either: 2-3 hours of talk time and about 5 days of standby. Although the \$299 price point may be daunting, the phone and the Sprint service give you an almost unbeatable combo.

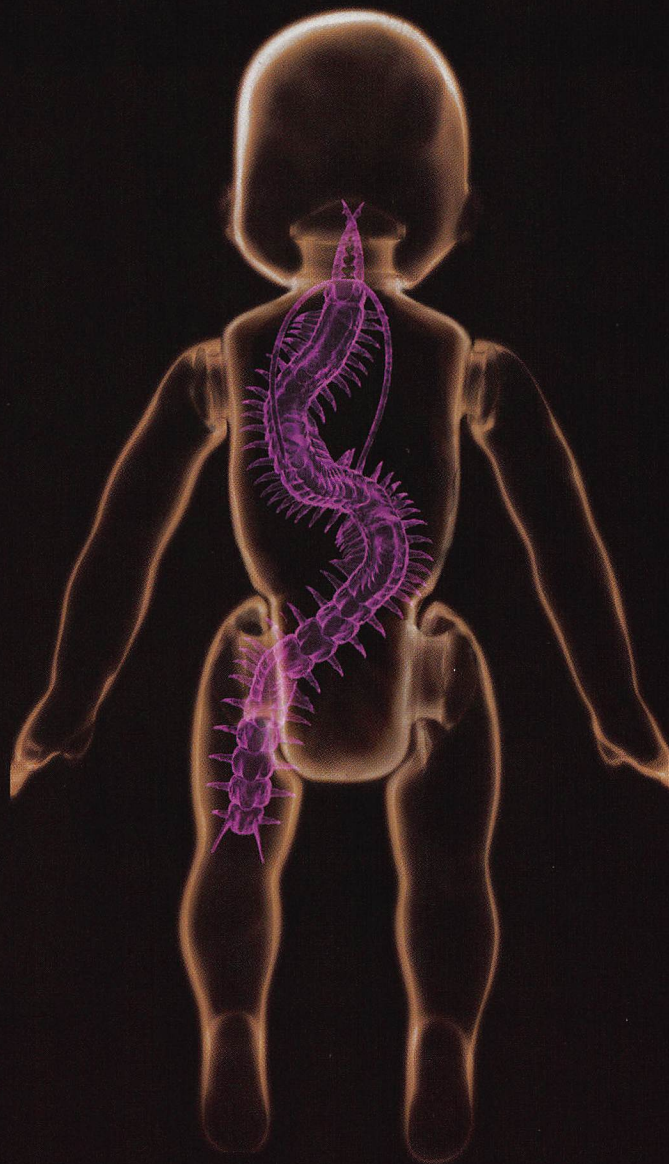
So let's recap: You can talk to all your friends, send pictures of your new boyfriend/girlfriend, impress everyone, play games, and listen to the James Bond theme—all on your cell phone. What more could you want? Rush out and grab this baby. (Oh, by the way, we were just kidding about the Swiss Army knife feature.) Guess you can't have it all...

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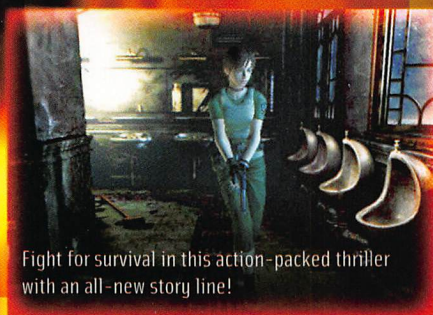
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